

LARKMEADOW

A NOVEL OF THE COUNTRY DISTRICTS

BY

MARMADUKE PICKTHALL

"There can be no doubt that with parish government an element originally sound and healthy disappeared from English life and politics. And the loss was all the more serious because it occurred just when the education of the masses had become a political necessity."—REDLICH AND HIRST: *Local Government in England*.

"Not only an Englishman, but an East Englishman."—GEORGE BORROW: *Lavengro*.

BRITISH
LIBRARY

LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS

1912

Y.S.

LARKMEADOW

I

IN the closing year of the last century the eyes of all England were intent upon South Africa, watching the slow turn of the tide of victory in favour of the British arms ; the village of Larkmeadow, however, remained unperturbed. Its inhabitants spoke sometimes of the war, but as men discuss the chances of a cricket match. Topics of livelier interest were the fire in Farmer Willett's rickyard, the new house which had sprung up in the parish, and the condition of the little footbridge by the school ; and these, in turn, seemed less engrossing to each gossip than the loss of twopence on a bargain, or a trifling cold in the head. Only one man in the parish espoused wider views, and he was thought by some to be a little " barmy."

On a fine evening in June this man, the chairman of the parish council, Edgar Catchpole, stood waiting at his cottage door for someone, without impatience, for he loved the scene and hour. There was just enough stir in the air to shed abroad the perfume of the lilacs in the cottage gardens, and give a vagueness to the cries of children at play upon the rise of heath behind the village. The sun would set in an hour.

Its rays, traversing the windows of a disused wind-mill on the heath aforesaid, made a spot of dazzle from which the gazer had to shield his eyes. Broad-shouldered, upright, of a sanguine countenance, Mr. Catchpole seemed still youthful, though his years were nearly sixty.

"Come in and set down, dew!" exclaimed his wife from the living-room. "Mr. Medders won't come now. What you want to agitate yourself for I don't know!"

"Come, come!" he chuckled, without looking round. "Poor Forman died in January, and here we are in June, his place not filled. That's time we did find someone."

"Well, you're not goin' out like that. Your back's all dusty. Katey, where's the brush?"

"You sit still, mother. I'll see to him."

His daughter Kate, a pert and pretty red-haired girl of seventeen, assailed Mr. Catchpole from behind. But just then his expected convoy hove in sight, and he sheered off, disregarding her objections.

Mr. Meadows was a working farmer, and had the slouch which comes of occupation with the soil. Thick sandy whiskers gave his face a foxy look, protective of a really sheepish character, inclined to giggles. He giggled now as he took note of Mr. Catchpole's clothing.

"What! In yer Sunday best? Well there, I never!"

"Must get up tidy when we represent the parish."

"Well, that's a good un, that is!"

"I thought o' trying Mr. Rush to start with."

"Come along, then! That's all one to me."

Rush was the village shopkeeper. He also dealt in coal and corn, and other matters, including contract jobs of all descriptions. He was in his garden, meditating, when they reached the gate—a stout man, with a hot complexion and cold eyes.

"We're one short on the parish council, Mr. Rush, and we thought we'd come and ask you if you'd care to join us."

"I ha'n't got the time," Rush murmured ruefully, apostrophizing a round flower-bed in a square of turf. "What wi' bein' on the District Council and the Board o' Guardians, I got more'n I can dew. But talkin' o' the parish, that reminds me"—he approached the gate—"the gentleman what have come to the new mansion have had chaps measurin' the heath, and there's folks don't like it, seein' that were always free and open. He's quite the gentleman—keeps three men indoors—and I reckon he'd dew a lot for the place, if folks don't rile un."

"So you don't see your way to joinin' of us, Mr. Rush?"

"No; I got more'n I can dew a'ready. I only keep on wi' the Guardians o'cause that dew good to the poor."

"Do good to yourself, more like!" muttered Mr. Catchpole, as he strode away. "If we had some contracts going, that'd make a difference. . . . We'll tackle Atheist next," he said aloud.

Their way lay back along the village street, now bathed in sunset light. From every gate some man or woman eyed them curiously. Against the Chequers Inn a group of idlers stood disposed to

jeer. Before an audience Mr. Meadows stepped self-consciously, and grinned, to show he saw the joke as well as they did ; but Mr. Catchpole harboured no such weakness. The joke was in his soul, a part of him.

A few steps past the inn a lean old man was sitting on a Windsor chair before a cottage door, reading a newspaper by the light of the setting sun.

" Good-evenin', Mr. Pretious !" said the chair-man genially. " We've come to ask if you won't join the council."

" No, that I 'on't !" The old man spoke excitedly. " Folks mob me suffen crool as 'tis, and, did I join the council, they'd make life a barden. I'm wholly sorry to refuse you, gentlemen. But you know the hoggish sort they be about here. Their mind be naught but ignorance and superstition."

From the company of scorers by the inn came laughter, and a shout of " Go it, Atheist !"

One of them called out : " I say, Mr. Catchpull, what be yow together goin' to dew about the furriner a-layin' claim to that there heth ? That's common land."

" Somethin' did ought to be done," observed another.

" If you want things done, come, one o' you, and join the council," was the calm reply.

The roughs were silenced. Every face, as it was turned away, expressed contempt of the suggestion as of a snare spread in the sight of knowing birds.

Mr. Catchpole and his friend returned along the

street. They tried their question on a swarthy labourer, smoking at his garden-gate, who removed the pipe from his mouth and spat deliberately before observing :

“ I can’t bear tarnin’ out o’ nights.”

“ That’s only four or five times in the year,” urged Mr. Meadows.

The supplicated one had spoken. He resumed his pipe, and seemed to lose all knowledge of their whereabouts.

“ Well, talk o’ patience !” giggled Mr. Meadows, addressing a small concourse of inquisitives.

“ There weren’t never such a rum long-sufferin’ pair o’ good old public characters as what we be. This here’s ta thard chap we ha’ axed in vain.”

“ Ah, men be bone-lazy, that’s what’s wrong wi’ them !” exclaimed a woman, with intent to sympathize.

“ We don’t say no to ladies,” answered Mr. Catchpole. “ Come you and join us !”

“ Suner beg ma bread !”

“ Well, let’s be-gettin’ on,” said Mr. Meadows.

“ I told my missus I’d be home by eight.”

The deputation set their faces towards the sunset. After walking half a mile they left the road and took a path across a wheat-field. The sun had set by then ; poppies and moondaisies were embedded in the living green which spread knee-deep around them, rustling faintly. At a stile at the top of the field Mr. Catchpole paused to take the view. Below them, in a little hollow, lay the village, its many voices rising like a sigh. The disused windmill on the strip of heath stood guard between it and a

wood of fir-trees, out of the midst of which appeared the chimneys of the new house.

"I wonder what kind of a man that is," said Mr. Catchpole, nodding towards those chimneys. The mansion, which had lately sprung up in the fir-wood, had for months past filled the village with a shyness such as fieldmice might conceive towards a sudden toadstool. "It seems that he've got wrong already 'long o' some folks. That heath ain't common, never was; but I'm glad of any cry to rally people to the council."

"What's his name? A proper mouthful, ain't it?"

"Mr. Harraby Vasey."

"Call that a name! More like a dictionary. Well, let's be gettin' on."

The stile gave access to a drift, which led them shortly to an upland farm. Light in the kitchen window of the homestead made them notice it was getting dark.

Mr. Catchpole's knock brought out a tall old woman, whose silhouette upon the lamplight looked defiant.

"We want a word wi' Mr. Carter, please," piped Mr. Meadows from behind his chief.

"He be at tea just now. He got home late fro' market. If that's subscriptions, I can tell ye, no, he 'on't."

"We want to ax a question. That 'on't take a minute."

Reluctantly she let them enter, with care to interpose her person for defence between them and the lamplit table where her husband munched. The

man did not get up or pause from eating, but simply mumbled "Evenun" with his mouth full.

"We can't get folks to take no interest in the parish council. Even at elections nobody won't come and vote. We're one short now, and that's a pity for the parish. We want to know if you won't join us, Mr. Carter?"

The man, as if stone deaf, pursued his meal. The woman answered for him :

"No, he 'on't, and never have done! He don't hold wi' politics. He try to keep hisself respectable, and not go mixin' up wi' public strife. Charch-warden he ha' been—that ain't so bad; but politics he 'on't and never shall. I'm surprised at Mr. Catchpull, Mr. Medders tew, a-temptin' un to sich disaster. And I will say——"

There seemed no end to what she would say if they stopped and listened. The delegates shrugged their shoulders and withdrew.

"Now let us try young Watman at the Bell," said Mr. Catchpole.

"I told my missus I'd be home by eight," his comrade moaned.

They made their way back to the village street, where every cottage showed a lighted window. As Mr. Catchpole passed his own abode he was aware of siren voices :

"Do come in now. That's no use you goin' on!"

"You might keep on all night at that rate, father!"

His wife and daughter stood together at the gate, forlorn and waiting.

"Just one more try!" called Mr. Catchpole manfully, while Mr. Meadows heaved a weary sigh.

They walked on past the windmill, past the new house lodge, and reached the Bell, a tavern more exclusive than its rival in the street. The landlord stood with arms akimbo at the door in conversation with a hulking labourer as they came up.

"No, not a drop more, Ditcher," he was saying, "till you settle up old scores."

"There don't seems no wark goin'," rose the plaintive whine. "I s'pose yow dunnow nobody as don't want nobody, not to dew nawn for 'em?"

"There's them tarnups o' mine wants hoein'," put in Mr. Meadows. "I offered yow the job last week."

"Paid by ta piece! I can't wark that way, guvnor."

"Take ut or leave ut, Dodman; that's all one to me."

With a snarl which sounded menacing, Mr. Ditcher, called the Dodman, slouched away.

"A wrong un!" chuckled Mr. Catchpole, looking after him. "I saw a lot o' his sort up in London. He's that revengeful if you cross him, and he'll stick at nothing. There's them ricks o' Mr. Willett's——"

"Well, what can I do for you, gentlemen?" the host cut in, with plain intent to close the subject.

"Why, come and join us on the council, Dick, and help the parish."

The innkeeper was very sorry, but—well, there, he couldn't. Public life was not like private. Men in his bar spoke freely, and they had the right. But if he were a member of the council it would

make them cautious, and spoil fellowship. The house would suffer. After vain attempts to cope with these objections, the pair of delegates retired, this time disheartened.

"I hate to be beaten," muttered Mr. Catchpole through his clenched teeth, deep in thought.

All at once, when they were near the lodge-gate of the grand new house, he seized his comrade's arm, made for that gate, and pushed it open, crying out : "I've got it !"

"What !" howled Meadows, struggling hard. "That mighty gentleman ! Let go ! I dussn't face ut ! I told my missus I'd be in by eight."

"The feller can but bite our heads off," chided Mr. Catchpole, as he dragged his quaking colleague up the drive. Arrived at the front door, he knocked and rang. The door was promptly opened by a solemn manservant, who, at mention of a "deputation," let them in.

The hall was furnished in outlandish fashion, with carpets on the walls instead of on the floor, which last was highly polished. Chairs and tables stood about as in a drawing-room. Mr. Meadows was just going to express amazement when a door before them opened, and a little grey-haired gentleman in evening dress came briskly towards them.

"Yes ?" he questioned.

"Well, it's this way, sir," said Mr. Catchpole, with some slight abashment. "Hearing that a gentleman like you had come into the parish, we thought you ought to be upon the parish council. We come to ask if you'll consent to be our chairman, sir."

Mr. Harraby Vasey smiled.

"No, no! Not chairman! A simple member I will be with pleasure. I appreciate the honour of your invitation. We have not been able to see much of the village hitherto, being so busy getting things in order here. But I wish to do my duty by the place. It is most kind of you to make the first advance. Of course, you'll send me notice of the meetings. I hope that I may be of some use to the parish. May I know your name? Thank you. You look as if you'd seen some service, Mr. Catchpole?"

"Thirty years in the City Police, sir."

"Ah, a splendid force! Good-bye, and once more thank you!"

The gentleman himself held the door for them to pass out, and warned them of five steps to be negotiated.

A few yards down the drive poor Meadows had a fit. Shaken, bent double, he squeaked out:

"Oh dear! Oh lor! Gawd bless my soul and body! What will the poor old dear say when he see the council?"

"That's a comfort to have someone pleased to see us. He didn't know the weary round we've been to-night," sighed Mr. Catchpole, with effective dryness.

"Oh, dew for mussy stop. That twist my innards. Yow'll fare the death of me!" sobbed Mr. Meadows.

II

MR. CATCHPOLE courted laughter for his public efforts because it kept men from remarking that he strove in earnest, a fact which he regarded as his nakedness. As a London policeman, he had seen young men and women flock up from the country into town, and had assisted at the tragic end of some of them. It made him sad. He would have liked to see folks rush the other way—out to the country, where was air and room to breathe. But the villages, he knew, were stagnant; they could no longer hold their own. Their local trades and industries had perished, and there was no corporate life in them to struggle for improvement. He had thought all round the subject often as he trudged his beat.

The passing of the Parish Councils Act had pleased him greatly. It had seemed to him an honest, if belated, effort to revive the villages; and when he retired to Larkmeadow upon his pension, it had been in hopes to see some progress in his native place. But the very notion of a parish, other than ecclesiastical, was dead, killed by deliberate action of the authorities during more than half a century; and Parliament, pretending to resuscitate it, withheld the only reason of its being—the command of the rates. Any movement by the council would entail an added burden, and, as no one wished for that, it

sat inactive. Its high pretensions joined to helplessness made people laugh.

Mr. Catchpole laughed himself, but he was disappointed, and disappointment led him to abuse the Government.

"They care for nothing except cadging votes," he said contemptuously. "That'd save a lot of waste of money if they gave us the rates, besides benefiting the country. But no one hollers for it, and all them clerks and fellers feeding on the present system 'd holler out good tidily at any change. I'll tell you what our Government remind me of—them beauties you may see in London streets—crawl along, singing 'Abide with me,' and staring round at all the windows. Wherever there's a penny chucked 'em, there they'll run. That's just as likely to be back as forward."

His colleagues much enjoyed this rage of grievance, which, to judgments fatalistic as regarded government, appeared as comical as falling foul of wind or rain. Indeed, most of them only stayed upon the council for the fun of listening to so quaint a humorist. And Mr. Catchpole, rather flattered by their plaudits, which showed his words were a success in one way, took on facetiousness as his official garb.

But though he thus despaired and jested, he did not give up. The village as it should be was his constant daydream, and with a little help it seemed to him it might be realized. He kept the reading-room going, tried to found a club for divers games, and did his best to foster public spirit upon all occasions, without support from the gentry, for the

squire was an absentee, the vicar a recluse in feeble health. It had long been his belief that, if he could only interest some man of wealth in these experiments, they would be at once successful, and he now proceeded to hang hopes on Mr. Harraby Vasey. The sudden impulse which had driven him to approach that gentleman seemed providential when he came to think about it.

"There's no end to the good he could do in this place if he liked," he told his daughter Kate next day, when he and she were in the backyard after dinner, engaged in netting a strawberry-bed which was his pride. "I must work him somehow. If it was Rush in my place, he'd get round him more artistic. I never could use soft soap."

"I should think not, father!" snorted Kate, whose pertness was in truth mere independence, combined with shrewd perceptions and a merry look.

"A fine thing, though, if we could get a real rich man like him to back the parish. We'd soon make other places discontented. We'd have our own cottages and almshouses, and a parish hall, and evening classes, all run by our own selves on public lines; and then I shouldn't wonder if we didn't take and start some kind of industry to help the place look up."

"And then the Government 'd tax you dead, or pass a law against it," put in Kate maliciously.

"What's that?" said Mr. Catchpole, shocked and startled. "That's about right, I guess," he added, chuckling, when he recognized that the weapon pricking him was a dart from his own armoury.

"You're getting a match for me, you rogue! That was a nasty trick."

They were at this point in the conversation, their bodies occupied in pegging down the fringes of the net between them, when a boy came running round the corner of the house, and bawled:

"Please, Mr. Catchpole, father's compliments, and Maffy King have been relieved. You can hear the Nornham Charch bells goin' if ye stand and hearken."

"Tell your father I'm a-coming," answered Mr. Catchpole, stamping in the final peg. "Go you and hang our flags out, Katey, while I see what's up."

At his garden gate Mr. Catchpole met the man who had despatched the tidings, a cobbler by profession and an ardent patriot. The landlord of the Chequers stood out consequentially before his inn, conversing with the Dodman and two other loafers; the aged Atheist was just emerging from his cottage door. At sight of Mr. Catchpole everyone came towards him. The Dodman called out:

"Didn't we ought to ha' a bonfire on ta heth to-night? That's common land."

"That ain't a bad idea," said Mr. Catchpole. "But that heath's no more common than what you are. There used to be a gate against where Atheist now live. One o' the posts is still there, t'other's rotted."

"That's common land, I say."

"What I say is," thrust in the Atheist excitedly, "we ha'n't no call to rejoice over this here shameful business. Them there Boers have rights the same as us——"

" You shut yer jaw, Atheist, or yow'll get that broke for ye," enjoined the Dodman sternly. He and his fellows, with the innkeeper, surrounded the old man, and talked against him.

" Ben," whispered Mr. Catchpole to his friend the shoemaker, " just run up to the Vicarage and get the church bells ringing, and anyone 'as got a flag had better show it. I'll be back directly."

He went indoors to get his hat, and then strode off in the direction of the new house. In a quarter of an hour he was back again before the Chequers Inn, where the Atheist still held his ground against the friends of orthodoxy.

" Well, we can have our bonfire," Mr. Catchpole told them. " We may cut as many whins as we like, and Mr. Harraby Vasey's sending up some stuff to burn, besides a can of oil to set things going. He and his folks 'll join us on the heath to-night." At that loud murmurs rose.

" Yow ha'n't never been and axed permission? Well, o' all ta mucky, slinkin' tricks! That's common land!"

" Since when?" asked Mr. Catchpole blandly, nothing daunted. " Three years ago you wouldn't, none of you, have dared to cut a stick there, time old miller was alive."

Five or six voices answered doggedly: " That's common land!"

" Well, if 'tis, my asking leave this once won't make that private. I'm going up to get the bonfire laid. If you together like to lend a hand, I'll thank you; if not, I'll soon find others."

The roughs, though sulky, followed him towards the heath.

"That's common land," the Dodman still insisted.

"Now look you here, together," exclaimed Mr. Catchpole, stopping where a sandy path went up from the roadside. "See this post? There used to be another, and a gate between. The heath was private enough. I can mind the time when most of it was ploughed and sown, and that's been bought and sold three times to my remembering. There was just a path to the mill."

"Ah, yow may talk, but that were common land afore the time yow tell on. Someun took and stole ut."

"Oh, come along! Let's get to work."

Two men from the new-house garden had already made a goodly heap of straw and packing-cases in a clearing of the gorse. They soon returned with a fresh load. Mr. Catchpole and his band took off their coats. Some of them fell to arranging what was already there, while others went in search of hooks with which to cut the whins. The two cracked bells of Larkmeadow Church were ringing lamentably; the splendid peal of Nornham could be heard at intervals. Ominous rainclouds moved across the sky, propelling with their heads thin ghosts of sunlight.

"I hope the weather 'll hold up," said Mr. Catchpole.

"That dew look rayther hefty," said the Dodman, glancing upward with a knowing eye, "but so long as this breeze hold that 'on't come down, I reckon."

The children, presently released from school, swarmed up on to the heath to watch the workers.

"Yow'll excuse me speakin' freely, but I marn say, drat them bells!" exclaimed the Atheist, who, being lone and talkative, had come up too. He felt secure in Mr. Catchpole's presence from the dread of horseplay. "I wish they was at bottom o' ta sea, ta charch along of 'em."

"I wonder yow bean't afeared to talk like that," observed the Dodman sternly. "Yow'll be struck dead some day, and yow'll ha' yerself to blame. I shouldn't like to fare so sarten sure o' hell hereafter as what yow dew, Atheist!"

"Hell! He, he! A lot o' childish nonsense. I don't intend no disrespect to no one, but, that's known, there ain't no such place."

"Yow wait and see, old dear!"

About five o'clock Mr. Catchpole put on his coat and went home to tea. The Dodman whispered to his cronies as he watched him depart. Two of them then set off in the same direction, to return in a minute with the sole surviving gatepost. The Dodman, who stood ready with a pitchfork, lifted up the topmost whins, and amid much laughter the post was concealed in the heart of the pile.

With the first shade of twilight people began to gather upon the heath. The new-house party, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Harraby Vasey, their son and daughter, their niece, Miss Ethel Harraby, and a gentleman visitor, arrived early. Mr. Catchpole, as master of the ceremonies, forsook his daughter's side to do the honours for them. Kate, left standing

alone, appeared disdainful in the clutch of shyness. Her posture was taken as a challenge by young Harraby Vasey, who found no savour in the talk around him. Mr. Catchpole noticed this with secret chuckles, but when a minute later he observed the young man and his daughter chatting merrily he thought it time that they were properly introduced. But Mr. Harraby Vasey's cordiality detained him. Kate stood alone once more when he rejoined her.

"That is a jolly boy!" she said delightedly.

"Fie, fie! We mustn't talk like that, irreverent!" he scolded. "Haven't you heard me saying 'sir' and 'madam' to 'em, every word? That's to keep 'em in their place. They need a deal o' bolstering. Just you listen now this minute, and you'll learn the way."

Mr. Rush was paying his dutiful respects to the Harraby Vaseys. They could hear the voices. It had grown too dark to see.

"He do it all right, don't he?" chuckled Mr. Catchpole.

"Enough to make you sick!" said Kate with scorn.

The crowd was then compact about the stack of fuel, which rose above them like a funeral pyre. The landscape round loomed black and featureless, the village lights being hidden in a fold of the land. All at once a little glow was seen to westward. It threw up shapes of trees minute and toylike.

"There go Nornham!" someone shouted, and all turned to gaze.

"There go another! That be Cloverfield, I guess."

Mr. Catchpole cried : " We're going to light up ours. Get you all to windward of the stack, and you boys look alive and beat out sparks. As soon as the flames get up we'll sing ' God save the Queen.' "

" I don't wish no disrespect to no one, but I can't abear that beastly noise. I'm off, and that's a fact," exclaimed a piping voice.

" You'll please yourself, Atheist. . . . He ain't a bad sort of a man," Mr. Catchpole explained, for the benefit of the strangers, " only there's a few things like religion and patriotism kind o' get on his nerves."

" That's the case with a good many people," said the visitor at the new house, who had stood aloof with Miss Harraby Vasey in a way which struck the villagers as supercilious. His tone was of contempt. " That fellow with the oil-can seems to know his business."

The individual referred to was John Ditcher, who had snatched the oil-can from the hand of one of the new-house servants, and was distributing the contents with nice care and judgment. He seemed another man in his excitement, showed not a trace of that habitual lethargy which had earned for him the nickname of the Snail or Dodman. The older people turned away as if from an indecent exhibition, his reputation as a fire-maker being of no enviable sort.

" Knows it a sight too well," muttered Mr. Catchpole.

The good effect of these arrangements was soon evident, for no sooner was a match applied to the pile than a mighty flame leapt up. People saw each

other's faces, the humps of gorse, the hedge, the windmill, with surprising suddenness.

"God save the Queen" was sung, and cheers were called for Baden-Powell and Lord Roberts; then youths and maidens started comic songs.

"Three cheers for Mr. and Mrs. Harraby Vasey and party!" sang out Rush obsequiously, seeing the new-house people about to retire. The response was lusty; people wished to make a noise.

"I'm glad we took an' barnt his landmark," breathed the Dodman to a friend, "so as we can cheer un wi'out malice in our hearts."

Songs and private conversations were being renewed, when, to everyone's amazement, Mr. Harraby Vasey thanked the village in a formal speech. On such an occasion he had been glad to let them have their bonfire on the heath. Indeed, he hoped that if any of them ever stood in need of help of any kind they would have recourse to the Grange (The name produced a slight sensation). He had come among them as a stranger; they had received him as a friend. He would never forget that reception, would always endeavour to retain that friendship.

"Well, did you ever?" whispered Mr. Catchpole in his daughter's ear. Just then he cherished for the grey-haired magnate the same pity he had felt, as a policeman, for little children lost in London streets.

III

FAR from requiring custody or guidance, Mr. Harraby Vasey was a man of good intelligence, no-wise deficient in the sense of humour.

In appearance he was little, but not unimposing. His forehead bulged portentously above grey bushy brows which overhung a pair of shrewd grey eyes. The disappointment of a nose erect and plastic was more than compensated by a goodly chin, of which his rounded cheeks seemed simple provinces. When he frowned his mouth fell open, the underlip hung loose and trembled plaintively ; when he smiled his mouth shut and his lips tightened, imparting to his mirth a quaint discreteness. His favourite pose in conversation was to stand or stroll with hands behind him, eyes intent upon the ground, until he saw his chance to score a point, when he would look up suddenly. His smile was constant in these days at Larkmeadow, for had not Fortune crowned him with her choicest garlands ? What seemed to Mr. Catchpole his stupidity was simply the result of gladness amid strange surroundings.

The son of a doctor at Hampstead, himself a partner in the firm of Harraby and Price, solicitors, of Amen Court, he had spent his life in London and its neighbourhood, with the exception of a month each year at some seaside resort with his family, and

flying visits to the country upon business. Ever since his marriage with Miss Amy Harraby, which greatly bettered his position in the firm, he had lived at Wimbledon in a good suburban house, with its own stabling, and had journeyed to the city every day. He had deemed himself the luckiest of men until a year ago, when the will of a distant, almost unknown, relative enlarged his outlook with dramatic suddenness. A Mrs. Smith, the widow of a maltster in East Anglia, died, leaving him a fortune estimated at three hundred thousand pounds, including many scattered farms and this new house at Larkmeadow.

His first emotions had been awe and some mis-giving due to the revolution in his way of life ; but in a day or two came boyish glee. He raised the wages of his servants, tipped his clerks, and let his partners cheat him slightly when he sold out of the firm. His wife and daughter grieved at leaving Wimbledon ; he flung them consolations with a lordly hand. On Mrs. Harraby Vasey he bestowed a thousand pounds, with charge of all the furnishing and decoration ; he also asked her pet niece, Ethel Harraby, who was like a daughter, having spent her childhood with them, to join her at the Grange. For Beryl he did more. In her girlish cult of mind—a phase he judged it—the child had given her affections to a man named Bredbane, a Socialistic pamphleteer and journalist. Mr. Harraby Vasey disapproved of the connection upon grounds of rank, and would not hear of an engagement while they lived at Wimbledon ; but now, in the fulness of his heart, he gave the ill-assorted pair his blessing,

invited Alfred Bredbane down to Larkmeadow, and was relieved to find him quite a modest fellow.

There was but one cloud in his summer sky—a cloud too small to mar its brightness, yet a vexing presence. Mr. Harraby Vasey had relations in the neighbourhood.

His father, the doctor, had been born near Larkmeadow, at a house called Cloverfield Hall. An uncle, seen once in his childhood, had impressed him as the typical old country squire; he had never doubted but his father's people were of what is called "good family." It was therefore with a shock that, when installed at Larkmeadow, he learnt that Cloverfield Hall was a substantial farmhouse, his uncle's son no more than a substantial farmer, well known as such, and liked by the surrounding gentry.

Mr. Harraby Vasey made the best of this discovery, and determined to be more than cordial to his cousin Robert; but he felt abashed in presence of his wife and children, who had, he felt, the right to view him as a mild impostor.

Robert Vasey, the farmer, was a widower with many sons. His sister, who kept house for him, called at the Grange one day when everyone was out; Mrs. Harraby Vasey returned the call within a week, but fared no better; it seemed that they were destined not to meet. Was the farmer holding back on purpose, daunted by his London cousin's wealth and station, fearing to be thought uncouth? That must not be, Mr. Harraby Vasey decided with a strong inflation. He was not a snob, and blood is thicker than veneer. The Robert Vaseys were, besides, his nearest neighbours, since Larkmeadow

Hall, the Denhams' place, was to be let furnished, and the Vicar, poor old man, shunned all society. He resolved himself to go and claim his cousin's friendship, but the expedition was postponed from day to day.

As if to balance this small stab to satisfaction, came, first the deputation from the parish council, and then the hearty cheering on the heath. Of course, he knew that the villagers paid court to him with selfish hopes, but then in all allegiance there must be self-interest ; he laughed at their too open flattery, but supposed it usual, the sort of thing the county gentry regarded simply as a proper deference. Meaning to do his duty by the parish, he responded cordially, but with a certain hesitation, these country people being strange to him, their minds unknown ; and when summoned to attend a parish council meeting, he experienced the nervousness a town-bred child might feel on being sent into a field where cattle waited. Hitherto he had known the lower orders, so to speak, only in captivity—horses between the shafts, well-trained and driven for him. He and Mrs. Harraby Vasey had always been extremely kind to servants ; the whole of their Wimbledon establishment had moved with them into the country. They had also a decided turn for charity. But these folks, while inferior, were independent, which made the part he had to play extremely delicate. He prayed for inspiration of the proper tone, the fitting manner.

"It is an ordeal," he informed his family as they sat at dinner previous to the meeting. Mr. Harraby

Vasey being due at the school at eight, the meal took place a little earlier than usual.

"You'll get along all right, dad," said his son Gerald. "All the people here seem ripping sorts."

"I can sympathize with you, sir," said Alfred Bredbane. "A chorus of adulation is a thing I couldn't face. You'll hear nothing else to-night, I expect."

"They're not a bit like that," said Gerald hotly. "They're just the same as we are—awfully polite to people they think swells."

"Hush, Jerry! That sounds rude!" his mother chided.

"Alfred is partly right," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, after a moment's introspection. "I must confess I find their compliments too fulsome, and that is why I feel a little nervous at going alone among them. Their fire will be undivided; I shall get it all." He laughed despairingly.

A minute later, as he started down the drive, wearing a light overcoat over his dress-clothes, he could hear his heart beat, and felt small and friendless.

IV

THE school-house door was open, and the lamps were lighted in the larger class-room, whose yellow-washed walls were hung with maps and diagrams, and highly-coloured portraits of strange birds and beasts. The outside twilight in the frame of the two lofty church-like windows had the effect of stained glass, peacock-blue. Mr. Catchpole stood beside the teacher's table conversing with three other members, who leaned, half sitting, on the desks. He stepped out to meet Mr. Harraby Vasey, and shook hands with him.

"Got a cold, sir?" inquired a member, with a huge brown beard and boyish eyes, surveying the gentleman with interest.

"No, thank you, no!" said Mr. Harraby Vasey.

"The gentleman's in evening dress, Jim; that's the matter," explained Mr. Catchpole, chuckling, from the height of his experience. "That's chilly compared to what they wear in the daytime. The gentry have a special dress for dining late. I ought to know about it, seeing the times I've stood to guard the silver from 'em at great City dinners."

"I ought not really to have changed this evening," the topic of discussion mused aloud.

"Oh, don't you worry, sir!" laughed Mr. Catchpole. "Only you'd better loose your overcoat. That's warm in here."

With that he returned to conversation with his rustic peers. After a minute of embarrassment Mr. Harraby Vasey took example from the others, and sat down on the edge of a desk.

Presently there was a noise of footsteps on the gravel of the playground, boots were kicked against the doorstep, and the remaining members of the council thundered in. They touched their foreheads to Mr. Harraby Vasey with broad grins.

"Set a chair for the gentleman here agen the table," called out Mr. Catchpole.

Mr. Harraby Vasey was placed on the right hand of the chairman, opposite the clerk, who at once began to read the minutes of the previous meeting. When these had been passed, Mr. Catchpole stood up, and in plain terms proposed the name of Mr. Harraby Vasey as a candidate for the vacant seat upon the council. Mr. Meadows seconded the motion, and the election was completed by a show of hands.

"Well, now we're shipshape," chuckled Mr. Catchpole. "I'm glad we got you, sir."

"Why is Mr. Rush not with us?" the new member asked. "I understood he was a leading man in parish matters. He is quite a friend of mine."

The meeting seemed embarrassed. There were covert smiles.

"There ain't enow hang tew ut, sir," drawled one of the members, a labourer with face impassive as a mask. "'Taint like the Guardians and the District Council. And that fare tew near home. There's folks 'd come and tell un what they thought, whereby on the Guardians and the District Council they be

mostly gentry. He have a way wi' un the gentry like, have our old blow-porridge."

"That's enough. Let's get to business," Mr. Catchpole interrupted. He picked up a letter from the table. "Gentlemen, the business we are met to consider to-night concerns Love Lane. This letter here, from Mr. John Batts, junior, complain as that be in a terrible state—all overgrown."

"Ah, that's ta trewth!" exclaimed a member. "I were up there yesterday. There ain't not room for tew to walk abreast. That's all a tangle o' funny great cock-brambles as'd play old Harry wi' a gel's skarts i' ta dark."

"Hew be young John Batts a'coortin' now?" inquired another. "We don't want to make ta game tew easy for 'em. That's onlucky. They marn endure their trials, same as others."

"No joke, that dew want suffen dewin' tew ut," said Mr. Meadows.

"Will flashing be sufficient, d' ye think, or do the hedges want to be cut right back to the spring?"

Mr. Meadows pondered for a moment, then pronounced:

"I should say a thorough flashin' o' both hedges 'd be all that's wanted."

"Well, gentlemen, as that's only flashing that's required, I was a-thinking we might give the job to poor old Crosby. He's past most work, and he do need the money. How much shall we pay him?"

"That's a three days' job. Seven and six is a fair wage."

"Well, are we all in favour of the job being done at once, and poor old Crosby doing of it?" All

were agreed. " Then I'll go myself and tell the poor old dear. We can stand the charge out of our half-penny rate for stamps and stationery, so those outside won't have no call to mob us. That's all this evening."

There ensued loud shuffling of feet as the meeting rose. Mr. Harraby Vasey shook hands with the chairman and the clerk, nodded and smiled good-night to all the others, and went out. As he walked home under the stars, the lights in cottage windows watching him like eyes, he felt dejected, and a little cross. He had been quite out of place at the meeting. No one had asked his opinion ; he was not competent to hold one on the subject of debate ; he had cut a sorry figure, sitting mum and disregarded. His sense of failure was complete and irritating. Then all at once as he entered the gloom of his own fir-wood, heard the sighing of the branches overhead, and smelt their perfume, he saw the comic side of the discussion, and his mind was healed. Amusement came quite unexpectedly, upon a yawn. The flashing of Love Lane ! It had not struck him at the time. He had listened merely to strange words of rustic lore ; had gathered somehow that the verb " to flash " meant to cut off straggling shoots and brambles with a hook, which flashes doubtless in the sun. But now he laughed aloud. Those village fathers ! The care lest skirts of amorous maidens should be torn by briars, the need of room for two to walk abreast ! It was a story he could tell and tell again : the occupation of our parish councils, true paternal government ! He hugged the whole experience as something priceless.

V

DIRECTLY after breakfast on the following morning Mr. Harraby Vasey repaired to his sanctum, called the "library" on the strength of a large bookcase, with glass doors, which caught the light and so perplexed the vision of the books within. It was a lovely day. The window looked along a gay herbaceous border tremulous with bees, by a south wall, to a gate admitting to the kitchen garden, beyond which a still mass of fir-trees added brilliance to the sky. The voice of a lawn-mower, shrill as a cicada's, sang loud above the chirp of birds and drone of insects.

Mr. Harraby Vasey, seated at his desk, leaned back in his revolving chair, and gazed out, smiling. Viewed from the heart of comfort, his adventure of the night before seemed more absurd. He told the story of the council meeting once again to Alfred Bredbane, whom he had brought into his den for that sole purpose. Bredbane possessed a cultivated sense of humour; Mr. Harraby Vasey had discovered that upon the previous night, when the obtuseness of the rest of the party to this roaring joke had quite incensed him.

"It was not worth while your going," his wife had said.

Good Lord! The point was, he had gone. The

trivial discussion had been heard by him. Without the presence of the seer and narrator there had been no point at all. The dulness of some people set his teeth on edge. Bredbane's zest had come as oil on troubled waters. Able to turn to Bredbane as a fellow-sage, he felt pity rather than vexation for deficiencies which excluded their possessors from so rare a feast.

"It was the funniest thing you ever heard," he told him now.

"It's the peasant mind all over—gravely occupied with trifles," replied the guest with relish. "It comes of ages of subservience, of enforced looking downward, of contemplating little things like seeds, and straws, and insects."

Mr. Harraby Vasey smiled and nodded slowly, pleased to know that he could comprehend the peasant mind.

Just then the door was opened by a servant, and Mr. Catchpole was announced as craving audience.

"Ask him to come in here," said Mr. Harraby Vasey. "Now you will see our chairman," he told Bredbane. "We must treat him gravely. No allusions to 'Love Lane' or 'flashing,' please." He smiled behind his hand.

But Mr. Catchpole, when he entered, embarked at once on the forbidden topic.

"Good-morning, sir. You were at the meeting last night, and you know now what the parish council's like. We can't do nothing except keep up foot-paths, because we haven't got no money, and the folks won't hear of no addition to the rates."

"Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Bredbane,

who is staying with us," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, as he shook him kindly by the hand.

Mr. Catchpole glanced in the direction indicated ; he did not fancy Mr. Bredbane's quizzing smile. When seated, he resumed more shyly, turning his billycock hat upon his knee :

" Well, sir, as I was saying, it's like that—we can't do nothing. And that's a pity, because there's lots wants doing in the place, and I made so bold as to come and see you this morning, and ask what you thought about it. It's been my notion that if we could get a gentleman like you to take an interest, same as many do in foreign missions or in cruelty to animals, we might go ahead. If we had a little money that'd make all the difference ; we'd get to work and show the way to other parishes——"

" But, my dear sir," broke in Mr. Harraby Vasey, with a merry laugh, " do I understand that you expect me to finance the parish ?"

" No, not quite that, sir." Mr. Catchpole showed embarrassment, for that, and nothing less, was in his mind. " Not that quite, sir ; but I thought as you might give a trifle sometimes, as you would to charity."

He thought on flight, till he remembered Kate at home, and the comic chapter of adventures he would have to tell her, when, in the limelight of his own humour, which made tumbles laughable, his intrepidity revived.

" I shall certainly do what I can for the place," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, through delicacy withholding what was in his mind—to wit, that if money

must be spent on Larkmeadow, he deemed himself more fitted to apply it sensibly than the assembly of last night, the flashers of Love Lane.

"They did ought to have given us the rates," said Mr. Catchpole, with the chuckle of vexation.

"Perhaps—they thought—the people as a rule—I mean that some of them"—Mr. Harraby Vasey spoke with hesitation, picking his words in his anxiety to hurt no feelings—"are hardly equal to so great a responsibility." He coughed and looked away.

"You mean we're ignorant compared to you," was the reply. "Well, that's the truth. But then we're men of business in a way. We know the parish, and the cost of things, and we're used to making a little go a long way. That's more than you can say for the County Council, let alone the Government."

"A hit!" cried Alfred Bredbane, much amused. "And what would happen if you did get the existing rates?"

Mr. Catchpole was aware of the design to draw him on. He answered stiffly, without turning towards this new assailant:

"We could do away with the unions and all the officials, except the road surveyor and the auditor. We could give pensions in their own homes to the aged and infirm, besides doing all as is done at present—I'm supposing that the rates were fixed as they now are—and still have a tidy surplus most years to pay for an insurance, case of loss, and lay by for a cottage-building fund. That's greatly needed. We'd 'prentice likely boys to trades——"

“ Stop, stop !” laughed Bredbane. “ I gathered you expected the millennium. But what about the public asylum, the infirmary ?”

“ We’d pay for our own inmates.”

“ What about the poor officials you propose to cast adrift ?”

“ Oh, that don’t worry me ! The money they earn now would go to support free men instead o’ slaves.”

“ What’s that ? The agents of a free, enlightened Government called slaves ! I should like to see the day when every man in England is a slave of that kind.”

“ Well, I shouldn’t, and that’s flat !”

Mr. Harraby Vasey frowned at Bredbane, who at once desisted. He felt that it was time to close the argument. The poor man had been baited quite enough.

“ Well, Mr. Catchpole,” he said very pleasantly, “ there is doubtless a great deal in what you say, though I still incline to think the Government knows more than we do. I promise you to do my best to help the parish. As you know, I own some shocking cottages in Larkmeadow. Well, I have ordered plans for their improvement. I shall ask you to inspect those plans when they arrive, and give me the benefit of your practical experience.”

The tone was final. Mr. Catchpole took his leave.

When he was gone both shook their heads and smiled despairingly.

“ He has ideas, you know,” said Bredbane, “ but they’re all distorted. The man has thought alone in cramped surroundings. His parish council would

become the plaything of the squire and parson. He has not reckoned with the social incubus, yet this county, I should imagine, is as much a prey to it as any other."

"Alas, it is!" sighed Mr. Harraby Vasey. "I have a curious proof of that in my own family."

He paused a moment, half inclined to say no more; but the attraction of a sympathetic listener, a fellow-seer who took the higher standpoint, was not to be resisted, so he showed his wound.

"I have a cousin, well-to-do, well-educated, but people here look down on him because he is a farmer. And, which is still more curious, he accepts their attitude, and although I am his cousin, will not come and see me, simply because he considers me of superior station. Think of it! . . . Of course, I am not going to have that. Jerry and I were going to call on him this afternoon, but we shall have to postpone the visit, as I've wasted all the morning. Now go and talk to Beryl; she'll be angry with me for monopolizing you like this. I must find Jerry."

Bredbane found his affianced in an open loggia beyond the drawing-room, reading a book, while Ethel Harraby arranged some flowers in vases on a table near her. He sat down in a wicker chair and talked to Beryl, but his eyes kept watching Ethel, who was very graceful, and had an air of pointedly ignoring him. What with the comfort and the glorious idleness, the soothing prattle of the girls, the sunshine on the grass, the garden odours, he sank into luxurious dreams, which were

disturbed by Mr. Harraby Vasey's voice exclaiming irritably :

" I can't find Jerry. James tells me he went off with that man Catchpole. He's quite infatuated with these village people."

" Don't worry, dad !" laughed Beryl languidly. " Jerry's infatuations never last, you know."

" Here he comes, I think," said Bredbane on a yawn, hearing a sound of whistling close at hand.

Another minute, and the truant stood among them on the loggia, having cleared the three steps at a bound—a small, slim figure, and a pretty face whose present sunburn saved its owner from remarks that made him wince ; people had harped so on his likeness to a girl.

" I've been looking for you everywhere," observed his father.

" I just walked home with Mr. Catchpole."

" So I heard. . . . I wished to tell you that I cannot go to Cloverfield this afternoon."

" Just as you like, dad. Then I'll go with Mr. Catchpole. He's promised to show me a good pond where I can fish."

" I hoped that you were coming for a walk with me," his cousin pouted, seeing a storm-cloud gathering on the parent's brow.

" Oh, rather, Ethel, if you're keen on it !"

Mr. Harraby Vasey's frown was changed for an indulgent smile. Jerry was so sociable and so responsive, it seemed a pity there were no companions for him in the neighbourhood. If only there had been young people at the Vicarage ! As it was, poor Robert's children were the only hope.

Jerry must get to know them, have them often at the Grange. He himself was ready to embrace their father, even at the risk of scandalizing half the county. He loved the man for his astounding diffidence.

But Robert, as it happened, called that afternoon, when all his cousin's views were strongly modified.

VI

A BURLY wight without a shadow of self-consciousness, Robert ignored the evidence of wealth and taste which wooed his gaze on all hands in the drawing-room at the Grange.

"You're settled in, I see," was his sole comment.

He brought with him his only daughter, Alice, and two of his sons—"a sample," as he put it. The young people appeared ill at ease, the girl especially. She possessed straight features and a pair of scared grey eyes, which struck the note of wildness in her whole appearance. Her nervousness had been intense at entering a room so full of obstacles against a natural stride, and the perfect elegance of the Grange ladies further daunted her. She sat and fidgeted upon a sofa, shaking straight her big straw hat, which would fall sideways, darting anguished glances at her brothers, Ned and Walter, who were nervous, too. But Farmer Robert took his stand before the carved stone fireplace, and looked down upon his new-found relative with weighing eyes.

"So you're my Uncle George's son!" he said at length. "Tea? No, thankee; never take it in the afternoon." This to Jerry, who approached him with a cup and saucer. "It's a rum thing that we've never met before. So you've returned to the

old country—' back to the land,' as the newspapers say—and poor old Cousin Sarah left you all her money. She always said she'd leave it to my girl Alice there, till something Alice said or did offended her."

The girl at this point, finding all eyes turned on her, grew perfectly rigid, staring straight before her with hands tightly clasped in her lap. She blinked hard, and her lips quivered. Her condition was so pitiable that Ethel, who was tact incarnate, and had a tenderness for awkward girls as foils for gracefulness, took hold of her impulsively and said :

" Come out and see the garden !"

The girl bestowed on her a look that promised lifelong service, and sprang up. Jerry led the boys out, too. Embarrassment did not survive the open air, for soon their talk and laughter floated in through open windows. Alice clung to Ethel's arm, devoured her with her eyes adoringly—a central group which the three boys escorted.

Mr. Harraby Vasey heaved an inward sigh as he looked out at them, while Robert talked in his rough country voice, telling him all the tidings of their common family. Mrs. Harraby Vasey, Beryl, and Alfred Bredbane, respectful of the meeting of the cousins, talked apart.

Besides being a farmer in a large way, Robert Vasey filled the post of agent—he would call it " steward "—to the chief landowner in the district, the Earl of Mells. He spoke often of his lordship with old-fashioned reverence. He believed in education. His sons had been to Felsted—a good school ; Alice had had a governess at home. The wish to

show his cousin round the farm was oft repeated. There was some prize stock that was reckoned well worth seeing, and he was proud of the improvements—some of them his own invention—which had made his place a show one in the county. If Mr. Harraby Vasey stood in need of help or counsel, he was there at hand ; and he was up in all the details of the Larkmeadow and other properties, having been Cousin Sarah's right-hand man for many years. He it was who had bought the land on which the Grange now stood—had snapped it up for a song at a time when the Denhams at the Hall were short of cash. His speech had a noticeable tang of dialect, which, with his bluff appearance, gave an impression of good-natured unrefinement.

At last he said that it was time to go. The young people were called in from the garden. The boys and Jerry parted as stanch friends. Alice was heard imploring Ethel to come soon and see her. Then Robert Vasey got into the dogcart and assumed the reins ; Alice scrambled up beside him, showing lengths of leg ; the two boys tumbled in behind ; the restive horse sprang forward, and the party, waving hands, were whisked off down the drive at an alarming pace. The Grange resumed its air of tranquil elegance, the ticking of the clocks was once more heard. Jerry and Ethel started for their walk ; Beryl and Alfred strolled about the garden.

Left alone with his wife, who had returned to needlework, Mr. Harraby Vasey drew a hand across his brow. " An excellent fellow, really—excellent ! " he said. " But somehow not a bit what I expected."

VII

JERRY and Miss Harraby returned the visit of the Robert Vaseys on their own account. It was Ethel who proposed this, as a sudden thought, when the family assembled in the hall to say good-bye to Mr. Bredbane. She wished to mark indifference to the departure, for the sight of a clever, entertaining man, a creature full of possibilities, attached to unskilled Beryl, had disgusted her ; and she knew that her eluding his farewell would tantalize a little yearning she had wickedly provoked. For this she chose the moment of his going to project a walk with Jerry, and Bredbane tried in vain to catch her eye.

"A jolly good riddance !" Jerry murmured, as the hall-door closed.

"You mustn't be so spiteful," laughed his cousin. "I shall scold you well when we're alone this afternoon !"

Jerry answered : "Right you are !"

He did not dread her lectures, which were half caresses ; but better fortune was in store for him that afternoon, for when they set out she was in her acquiescent mood—the mood he loved, since it acknowledged him a full-grown man.

Ethel was of the race of conscious charmers who sheathe a mind as cool and trenchant as a knife-blade in all the arts that may excite desire. Brought

up in some dependence on her aunt and uncle, she had felt a difference in their kindness towards her from that enjoyed by Beryl and her other cousins, and the little grievance proved a goad to her intelligence. She grew observant, watchful, studying all means by which a girl may hope to triumph ; and by so doing she acquired sweet manners, grace of movement, and a tact which won her true affection where she sought but envy. Such charms, when added to a natural beauty, gave an advantage over her unconscious cousins which, however, she disdained to use—the sense that it was there sufficing her.

The elder girls had married badly, and now lived abroad ; they were forgotten by a mind intensely avid of the present. Only Beryl was left to represent the old antagonism, which had lost its sting when Ethel came into her independence. Indeed, she would have outgrown every feeling for her foster-family had it not been for Jerry's boyish passion—a new tie. This soft enchantress felt the bondage of her spell, and gave small bits of palm to all who owned it. Where admiration shone she leaned, of nature, and that was why she walked three miles to see the farmer Vaseys. The touching prayers of Alice were remembered, the longing in the eyes of those shy boys ; and Jerry's love-making was certain to beguile the way. She counted minutes wasted which made no demand upon her skill and coolness.

Their road lay up through lanes as deep as bowers, drowsy with perfume of wild rose and elder, and with hum of bees ; across wide fields, where poppies burned like lamps, and the flutter of white butter-

flies that came and went made a shimmer on the surface of green corn ; through a wood where gnats danced in the shade and birds were noisy, to a further lane which led by many windings down to Cloverfield.

Cloverfield Hall stood on one side of a marshy dale, where cattle browsed, in sight of church and village, but aloof from them. It was a solid, red-brick house of the late Georgian period, backed by farm-buildings of much older date. The approach was by an ill-kept drive across a paddock, which, being dotted with old timber, had a parklike air. A second gate admitted to a garden three parts shrubbery. Some exotic pine-trees and a cedar grew close round the house.

" It's quite palatial," Ethel whispered.

" A decent farm, that's all !" said Jerry gruffly, a little shaken by the fall to earth.

They were admitted by a very tidy maid, and shown into a large, old-fashioned parlour full of sunshine. Its open windows looked out on a tennis-lawn, where Alice and her brother Walter were disporting. On one hand was a rookery of elms, between whose trunks the farm roofs could be seen.

" By Jove, that girl can play !" cried Jerry, awestruck.

Miss Vasey entering just then, they left the window and sat down and talked. The tennis-players, their set finished, came indoors. Alice flew straight to Ethel and engrossed her, while Walter, with his racket still in hand, proposed a bout with Jerry. The latter, to disguise his real unwillingness, pleaded lack of shoes and racket ; but those

requisites were instantly provided. Ethel, with Alice and Miss Vasey, sat out by the lawn and watched the play till teatime.

Jerry was quite outmatched, and had the further shame of knowing that his opponent played him, as it were, left-handed, dealing easy strokes. The monotony of Walter's scoring—"Fifteen—thirty—forty—game"—attacked his nerves. He fancied Ethel and that gawky girl were laughing at him where they sat with heads together, and grew hot and irritable. It came as balm to him, when they went in to tea, to hear his adversary telling Ethel :

"He will make a player."

Owing to a rumoured delicacy of health in childhood, he had not been sent away to school, and as a day-boy had been kept from playing games. He had envied all athletic prowess as a thing beyond him. Now, Walter's verdict opened out bright fields of hope.

When tea was over, Alice carried Ethel off to introduce her to a crowd of dogs, her darlings. Jerry soon after found them in the stable-yard surrounded by a yelping pack of all degrees. He came to tell his loved one it was time to go.

"You will come again, won't you?" Alice cried, detaining Ethel in a close embrace. "It is so lovely of you to make friends with me!"

"Well, how do you like them?" Ethel asked as they recrossed the paddock.

"All right; but they're such awful swells, you know! I mean, they're all so good at things I'm bad at."

Boys who had been to a public school, and could

ride and shoot, a girl who could have beaten him at any game, seemed great to Jerry.

"Alice is nice, and will be quite good-looking. You might do worse than fall in love with her. I'm bad for you ; I'm so sophisticated. Try a healthy romp."

Ethel offered him his freedom teasingly, for the mere fun of witnessing his indignation. This was so great that in a fit of penitence she bade him kiss her. They walked as lovers, while the sun sank towards the woods. For three years she had been his pure ideal. His fancy roved, as was but natural, for all the imps of youth were in his eyes ; but from every aberration it stole back repentant. To-day he vowed fidelity till death. His new ambition to excel in games and Ethel's tenderness seemed all a man could ever need in life.

Reaching home an hour before sunset, they met Mr. Harraby Vasey coming out of the front-door.

"Come with me," he invited. "I'm just going to have a look at the new fence. It's done at last."

Jerry joined him dutifully ; Ethel, saying she was rather tired, went indoors.

The fence in question was a stout affair of tarred deal boards extending for two hundred yards beside the road, where the thorn hedge had grown ragged and was full of gaps.

"It looks more private, doesn't it?" remarked the owner. "At any rate, it will prevent the children running up and down this wood, as it seems they have been doing while the place stood empty. Now come up on the heath, and I'll show

you where I mean to put my water-tower, and also where the new plantations are to go."

They climbed between the fir-trunks up to open ground. The white form of the disused windmill blushed before them ; a flight of swallows wheeled and screamed around it.

With a hand on his son's shoulder, Mr. Harraby Vasey spoke of his proposed improvements ; while Jerry thought of Ethel and his Vasey cousins, and saw himself a mighty man in love and strife. All at once the father started.

"What—what's this ?" he gasped.

"It's only children, dad," said Jerry peacefully.

"Only children ! Quite enough !" was the irate rejoinder. The owner of the land advanced with a determined air.

The heath beyond the windmill seemed, indeed, to be alive with children playing hide-and-seek among the whins.

"Here, I can't have this !" cried Mr. Harraby Vasey, when a group of flying youngsters passed close to him. He might as well have tried to stop the screaming round of swallows overhead.

"Clear out ! Do you hear ?" called Jerry ; but the hunt had drifted far away.

A group of men, strolling with their hands in their pockets, came up from the village by a grassy track. Staring hard, as if he doubted his own senses, Mr. Harraby Vasey strode to meet them. It was warfare. Jerry's daydream fell to earth.

"Are you aware that this is private ground ?"

Thus challenged, the trespassers stood still, a sheepish picture, till one of them took heart and said :

“ Go yow along, guv’nor ! That’s common land ! ”

“ This heath is my private property, and I can prove it.”

“ Well, take and prove it, then ! ”

This apt retort evoked guffaws of laughter, and the men moved on.

“ Hulking, ignorant brutes ! They want horse-whipping ! ” shouted Jerry, trembling from head to foot.

“ Hush, hush, my boy ! ” his father whispered. “ We must keep our temper. These men have one excuse—they know no better—but we, on our side, must not stoop to rudeness.”

Mr. Harraby Vasey had himself been very angry till Jerry’s outburst shocked him back to calm. Now, as he talked to steady his son’s nerves, he saw the trifling nature of the incident.

As for Jerry, he could have dashed his head against a wall, he felt so mortified at being forced to stomach insult. If he had known how to box or use a stick effectively ! . . . But he was helpless, and the power to picture clearly how the champion of all England would have slain those louts only added ignominy to his plight. It spoilt the happiest day in all his life.

“ Come, cheer up, Jerry ! ” urged his father. “ It is really nothing—a mere piece of insolence. I’ll go and talk to Rush about it in the morning.”

VIII

IN the morning Mr. Harraby Vasey's equanimity was again shaken by the tidings that the new fence had been sawn asunder and in part thrown down. Directly after breakfast he went out into the road to view the damage.

"They must have been at work through half the night. It seems a miracle that no one heard them," he remarked to Jerry and to Ethel, who stood there beside him.

The inspector of police from Nornham and a constable came up on bicycles.

"I got your message, sir, and here I am," exclaimed the former, leaning his machine against the bank. "A shocking business; I can see that at a glance. Minns, where's yer notebook?"

The constable produced it from beneath his tunic. His knees were shambling, his arms loose; red whiskers stuck out round his rustic face like rays. He wore his helmet like a wideawake, and his appearance generally, suggesting that he had been snatched that moment from the plough, and dressed up in the uniform to frighten birds, made the Grange party smile, and eased the tragic strain. The inspector went over the wreckage carefully, dictating observations to his minion.

"Anybody you suspect, sir? Anybody got a grudge against you?" he inquired when this was done.

Mr. Harraby Vasey mentioned his encounter on the heath.

"Ah, that's a clue, sir. Make a note, Minns!"

With a splendid salute, which the constable travestied, the inspector swung a leg over his bicycle and rode away.

"I'll go on now and talk to Rush," said Mr. Harraby Vasey; and the three walked on together to the village shop. As the door-bell tinkled Mr. Rush came forward from a back cave hung with brushes, mops, and brooms.

"I want advice, Mr. Rush. You know this place," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, and then told his story. His tone of indignation was as nothing to that which Rush adopted in reply.

"Well, there, I never heard o' such a shockin' business! There's some folks haven't got no shame at all. There's a rough poaching gang in the place as 'd be better out of it, but I never thought they'd go so far as that!"

"The culprits shall be punished," said Mr. Harraby Vasey sternly. "I am offering five pounds reward; the notices are being printed. Perhaps you will be so good as to display one in your shop-window."

"To be sure I will," said Mr. Rush whole-heartedly. "And if I find out anything I'll let you know, sir. The shame on them to wrong so kind a gentleman, and one new come into the parish!"

"Thank you very much," said Mr. Harraby Vasey;

and with fresh tinkling of the door-bell the three went out again into the road.

The scattered cottages, no two alike, each with its garden spread before it like a flowered rug, bordering a roadway which meandered leisurely, some ancient trees, the smiling heath, the windmill, composed a picture of idyllic peace. A gaffer leaning on his staff before a cottage gate to watch some ducks disporting in a puddle, a woman hanging washing out to dry, an infant crying—the signs of human life appeared most innocent. The song of skylarks filled the upper air. Mr. Harraby Vasey sighed, and then gave a despairing laugh. It was hard to think that the inhabitants of such an Eden could ever be rebellious or ungente.

As they drew near once more to the wrecked fence they saw a man surveying it at ease, who raised his hat and came towards them, revealing the courageous face of Mr. Catchpole.

“I was waiting to see you, sir, about this business. That ain’t so simple as that seem at first. They claim as there’s a right-o’-way down through them trees. They say they done this only to assert their right.”

“Rubbish! If there had been a right of way it would have appeared in the description of the property which I possess.”

“That’s what I came about, to see if you’d got papers on the subject. They’re all at me, saying as the Council ought to take the matter up, but I won’t start nothing till I know we stand a chance.”

“Are you mad?” asked Mr. Harraby Vasey, losing his temper. “A chance, indeed! The land

is mine ; there is no right of way, and those who cut that fence shall be well punished. The matter is already in the hands of the police, and I am offering five pounds reward for information. Mr. Rush is on my side, and there must be other decent people in the village."

"My father doesn't quite see what you're driving at," said Jerry to the ex-policeman with a friendly grin. Ethel, with her usual tact, walked on alone.

"That's plain to see," said Mr. Catchpole, chuckling. "Do he wouldn't take my words so much amiss. . . . So you've seen Mr. Rush, sir, have you?" he continued. "He know who done this job as well as I do."

"You know? Then tell me the names at once, or it will be the worse for you," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, strangled by the sense of insult.

"Now you're talking silly, sir!" said Mr. Catchpole. "Everyone in the place knows well enough, except for evidence, and the police at Nornham know as well as we do. But you won't catch 'em. And as for putting up rewards and notices, you won't learn nothing that way. That'll shut all mouths, when, but for that, you might have picked up something in a friendly way."

"You mean that people won't tell because of the reward. That's sporting, anyhow!" said Jerry, who was all for peace.

But Mr. Harraby Vasey stormed. "You ought to be ashamed to side with criminals. You are no better than an accomplice. I will have the case reported. You had better tell me!"

"There's no crime here, sir," was the answer.

“ That’s a civil case, you know as well as I do. I meant you no offence, and here you quarrel. I thought you’d wish to clear up things, the same as me ; but, of course, if your mind is to stick to it, right or wrong—well, I misjudged you, and there’s no more to be said.”

“ Don’t talk such nonsense, when my right is quite undoubted.” Mr. Harraby Vasey’s tone waxed querulous. “ I’ve wasted time enough in listening to you. Good-morning !”

“ Good-morning, sir ; I’m sorry,” answered Mr. Catchpole.

IX

MR. HARRABY VASEY took some minutes to recover and view the episode with the amusement it deserved, and even then his mind retained a touch of irritation. What would Bredbane, who had ridiculed these rustics on the ground of slavishness, have thought could he have heard that altercation by the broken fence? And then the conspiracy of silence—the whole village braving him! He wished to goodness Bredbane had been there to support him in a humorous view of all this pother. As it was, he had lost his temper—a mistake.

His resentment of the manner of Mr. Catchpole's speech had at the time obscured its import, which seemed grave to sober thought. The war-cry of the people's right, once raised, might stir up feelings and awaken sympathies altogether disproportioned to the interests at stake. Knowing well the costliness of legal action in disputes of this kind—in which, moreover, the presumption is against the landlord—he determined to proceed with tact and caution—at any rate, until he had the facts by heart. At present he had little more to go on than his own opinion that no path existed. It was the same with regard to the heath, which some of these people seemed inclined to treat as common. He had not troubled to investigate his title.

That afternoon and evening he devoted to the papers which concerned the property. They were in order, and contained no mention of a common or a public footway. He called at Mr. Catchpole's cottage with those papers on the following morning, and apologized for his ill-temper.

"I was terribly upset about the damage to my fence, and I imagined you were taking side with the offenders. Now I have brought the papers that you wished to see, especially the map made when the land was sold ten years ago."

Mr. Catchpole cleared the table in his living-room of needlework belonging to his wife and daughter, shut the door into the backhouse to keep out their chatter, and gave up his mind to the inquiry. Mr. Harraby Vasey opened the map, which covered half the table. Both leaned over it.

"'Driftway to mill'—that is the only road or pathway marked, you will observe. You see, it ran from a gate corresponding to that of my present drive, across the site of my stables, and up on to the heath. The right to use it was confined to people having business at the mill, and ceased when the mill stopped working. Do I make it clear? If any of our kind friends wished to restore the said driftway, they would have to break through my shrubberies and pull down my stables." Mr. Harraby Vasey laughed good-naturedly.

"That's right enough, sir, as far as right goes. But ain't it possible for folks to make a right by doing wrong—I mean, by trespassing for years and years, and no one stopping 'em?"

"Such things have been known," was the reluctant answer.

"Well, as long as I can remember, folks have walked across that heath from by Mr. Pretious's cottage, where there used to be a gate, across to your fir-trees, and down to where they broke the fence. That started by taking short-cuts to the mill, some from this side, some from that. The two paths met, you see, and folks walked right across. If that's gone on for years and years, that makes a right. You mustn't mind my speaking plain, sir, but if there is a right we mean to keep it, though that seem unfair. So much have been snatched from us in the past that you can't wonder if we snatch a little in our turn."

"I see your point," conceded Mr. Harraby Vasey, "but I contend that the paths you mention were simply easements to the driftway before mentioned, and ceased when the mill stopped working two years ago; that people may have used them since as a continuous footpath; but that two years is not long enough to make a public right."

"Well, what we've got to find out is the truth."

"I wonder who could tell me now," mused Mr. Harraby Vasey.

"The Denhams at the Hall should know, sir. Mrs. Denham is down for a day or two, I heard Rush saying. She's a lady you can talk to. Shall I call and ask her?"

"I'll go myself at once," said Mr. Harraby Vasey.

Out in the village street a wind was blowing, cloud-shadows raced with sunbeams down the road, in pace with Mr. Harraby Vasey's thoughts, which

were exultant, for the interview had been a triumph for his new diplomacy. "Five pounds reward," he read the notice on a barn-end, again in a window of the Chequers Inn, and once more at the corner by the school. He wished now he had never had it printed; so much more could be gained by tact than fury. Pleased with his thoughts, he passed into the shade of waving woods, and, turning in at a gate beside a lodge, came in sight of the Hall—a square grey mansion with a pseudo-classic porch and stucco ornaments. The gardens were well kept, but the house itself appeared shut up.

As he rang at the bell Mr. Harraby Vasey felt some nervousness at thus approaching the lady of the manor, who must regard him as an upstart in the place. He charged the maid who opened to him with profuse apologies, requesting but a minute's private audience. He was not kept waiting. Mrs. Denham, a calm, grey-haired woman of quite plain appearance, apologized for the unaired state of the house, which obliged her to receive him in the entrance-hall. She was down for two nights only, and had opened as few rooms as possible. She sat down on a bench, and motioned him to take a chair beside her.

"I am afraid I cannot help you much," she said, when he had told his business, "and I doubt if my husband could tell you what you want to know. You see, it is some years now since we parted with that land. The talk about its being common I am sure is nonsense, but I really cannot say about the footpath. There is only one man in the neighbourhood who could inform you—Lord Mells's agent,

Mr. Robert Vasey. My husband regards him as infallible on everything to do with land, and it was he who bought the property from us. Please make my excuses to Mrs. Harraby Vasey, and explain that I am only down here for one day, or I should certainly have called on her. I am so sorry that our people have been rude to you. They are a rough set here, and have been much neglected. That poor old creature at the Vicarage has lost all influence."

Well pleased with his reception at the Hall, Mr. Harraby Vasey traversed the village with elastic steps, and, reaching home, announced his intention of driving to Cloverfield that afternoon.

"It's a little like the house that Jack built," he remarked with smiles. "Everyone refers me on to someone else. But now I think I'm near the end of it."

It began raining while they sat at lunch, and by the time he wished to start a dismal downpour had set in. Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who prized comfort above all things, and unselfishly desired it to extend to everybody, begged him to put off going, but he laughed at her solicitude. What had he to fear from rain in a closed carriage?

The landscape was obscured by darts of rain. Mr. Harraby Vasey pulled up both the windows, which soon grew misty and shut out the tearful prospect. He did not let them down until the carriage stopped, when he stepped out beneath a dripping porch and rang a bell.

"Mr. Vasey isn't in, sir," the maid told him. "He always goes to the estate office of a Saturday

afternoon. You'd find him there, sir. That's in the Park, close to the lord's mansion."

Telling the coachman to drive on to Jelwick Park, he once more boxed himself in comfort, keeping the windows up until the carriage stopped again, this time in sight of the great house—a vast and barrack-like expanse of red brick faced with stone. His coachman had pulled up to ask the way to the estate office. A man at work on the drive pointed out a little building half concealed by trees. Another minute, and the carriage reached it.

Before the door two gigs already waited, while to a ring in the wall was tied a saddle-horse, which plunged viciously and showed the whites of its eyes. With caution to avoid that brute Mr. Harraby Vasey alighted and passed into a kind of ante-room or outer office, where one of Robert's sons—the eldest, Charley—sat at a desk in his shirt-sleeves, talking to two grinning countrymen. The youth stood up politely and shook hands.

"Father's busy just at present, sir, but he'll soon be ready if you wish to see him. Please sit down."

Charley resumed his conversation with the yokels, which, consisting of half-statements, nods, winks, grins, and sudden bursts of laughter, seemed like nonsense to the uninitiated hearer. Mr. Harraby Vasey looked about him. Above the mantelpiece was hung a framed certificate, of which the words, "First Prize," alone were legible from where he sat. Upon the walls were notices, some general, as concerning anthrax and swine fever, and others purely local, signed "By order—MELLS."

The inner door sprang open suddenly, and a man with a very red face fled through the ante-room.

"There go a man have had his bellyful," chuckled one of Charley's friends.

Robert Vasey then looked in, and, beckoning to them, said :

"Come on, you men! I can take you both together, since it's pleasant business. Hullo!" he exclaimed, catching sight of his rich cousin. "Want to see me about something? I'll be ready in five minutes."

In less than the time promised the two tenants reappeared, beaming widely and exclaiming: "Thank ye, thank ye, Mr. Vasey, and his lordship, too, I'm sure."

It was Mr. Harraby Vasey's turn to pass into the sanctum, which was furnished like a boardroom, with one long table covered with green baize, and set about with chairs. One wall was entirely taken up by little drawers, each of which was neatly labelled with a name and date.

"I want advice," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, a little daunted by the atmosphere of great concerns, "about that piece of heath behind my place. Some of the villagers declare that it is common land, while others claim a right of way across it, out by the fir-plantation to the road. You heard, perhaps, that they have smashed my fence."

His cousin nodded, then considered.

"You can set your mind at rest upon the first point," he pronounced at length. "That heath never was a common. At the time so many commons were enclosed by private Acts of Parliament

that was ploughed land. Then, later on, they let it with the mill, and the miller, having a horse or two to feed, let the grass grow till it got as wild as it is now. It's poor land thereabouts, and it reverts to heath in no time, and there are a lot of fools about who call heath 'common.' The right of way's a different matter. As long as I can remember folks have cut across there to the mill, and of late years they've strayed about there pretty much as they liked. But the excuse was always the mill, and now the mill's closed I should doubt if they could prove a scrap of right."

"That is my opinion. I am glad to have it confirmed. I felt certain from the moment I heard the claim that there was nothing in it. Well, now I only hope that the police will catch the men who did the damage. I am offering five pounds reward."

"Pooh, pooh! All that's no good!" scoffed Farmer Robert. "You only put folk's backs up, and you'll get in trouble."

"You really think so? Mrs. Denham said this morning that the people in our village were a rough lot."

"We're all a rough lot hereabouts on occasions, though we're easy enough to do with if you take us the right way. If there is one thing we hate, it's a new broom. If a stranger moves a stone from there to there we're up in arms, whereas, if an old neighbour did the same thing, we should very likely only chuckle and applaud his artfulness. Their walking on that bit of heath won't hurt you, though I should prosecute 'em, mind you, if they cut a stick."

The farmer's tone displeased Mr. Harraby Vasey, who had come for information, not advice.

"But I must mend my fence," he said contentiously.

"I wouldn't, in your place. I'd leave it just as it is until they get the neighbour feeling for you. The path is no good really as a way to anywhere. You'll find they'll use it less and less as time goes on; they only use it now to rile you. And a foot-path on the place is nothing terrible here in the country; it isn't like near towns. Why, there's a right of way bang past his lordship's door, and foot-paths through the Park in all directions. If you go and rile the village people you're an ass."

Mr. Harraby Vasey started and grew red. He was going to make a crushing answer, but just then a fresh voice joined the conversation—a cultured and well-modulated voice—remarking:

"Though I am totally unacquainted with the gentleman thus stigmatized, I can solemnly assure him that if Bob Vasey tells him he's an ass, he is an ass. He has called me the same animal a score of times, and I have never known him err in that description."

The speaker was a tall, long-bearded man, who had that moment entered. His beard was turning fast from red to white, his prominent grey eyes appeared short-sighted, his shoulders were thrust forward in a heavy stoop. He bowed when Mr. Harraby Vasey turned and stared at him, then coolly took a chair at Robert's side.

"The gentleman, my lord, is my first cousin, Mr. Harraby Vasey, from Larkmeadow; so it's all in

the family," the latter explained, with his big laugh.

Lord Mells rose again and gravely bowed. "Alice is out there with your trap," he told the agent. "She tells me poor old Parker died this morning."

Mr. Harraby Vasey, much embarrassed, took his leave.

"Remember my advice!" his cousin cried.

Alice, in a mackintosh and a man's cap, sat waiting in her father's gig, holding the reins dropped, while she shouted conversation to her brother in the office. Mr. Harraby Vasey's appearance silenced her, and she blushed furiously as she acknowledged his salute.

Mr. Harraby Vasey flung himself into a corner of his carriage, and brooded on his griefs as he was driven homeward. He was disgusted with Lord Mells and Robert Vasey. For the great man of the district he was henceforth Robert's cousin—a person simply of the farmer class, with money and ideas above his station. He longed at that moment to be back at Wimbledon, in the circle of his old acquaintance, cultivated, wealthy people, equally removed from lords and farmers. Things Bredbane had said about the aristocracy and their retainers, derided at the time, recurred with force. Such men were the great barrier to social progress; it was seen how they affronted the new-comer and made game of him. He promised himself that he would write to Bredbane that same evening, for the comfort of confiding in a fellow-humourist, and also to announce a change of views. It was true, as Bredbane had declared, that any man of candour confronted with

the state of classes in the rural districts, must ardently desire the dissolution of the great estates.

By the time he reached home it had stopped raining. After tea he walked into the village and reported his day's work to Mr. Catchpole.

"So, you see, in the opinion of good judges, there is no right of way," he said, as a conclusion to the narrative of his inquiry.

"If we could only make 'em see that, sir!" was the reply. "Suppose we was to call a Council meeting, and get the other side to come and give their evidence; then you could talk to 'em, and see if they'll hear sense."

"An excellent idea!"

Mr. Harraby Vasey assented to the proposition with the more alacrity because it was against the counsel of his cousin Robert. He looked forward to a good laugh at the stupefaction of the farmer, who had foretold trouble, when all was settled by a little pleasant talk.

X

ON the following Wednesday, as Mr. Harraby Vasey walked in the dusk of a cloudy evening through the village to the lighted schoolhouse, a small portfolio under his arm, he felt confident of his power to overcome unreason. He expected to find the whole male population of the parish assembled in the classroom to perpend his arguments, but, besides the members of the Council, there was only one old man, who sat uneasily upon a form inside the door. This one spectator had a hawk-like face, a long white beard, and prominent brown eyes alight with inspiration or insanity. As Mr. Harraby Vasey entered he stood up and touched his forehead very civilly.

"It's a poor attendance, sir," said Mr. Catchpole, shaking hands. "There's only Atheist here besides ourselves. Where's Dodman, and young Harbut, and that crew? They had fair notice. I made sure they'd come and give it us, the way they talked."

"I guess they're in the pub," said Mr. Meadows. "They be the sort as 'on't come for'ard and speak out, though they'll growl and grump together fit to kill a pig. They'd suner break yer head than tell ye why. I'll step across and call 'em, if ye like."

"You might see what you can do," sighed Mr. Catchpole.

Mr. Meadows took his hat and set out, giggling.

"Atheist," said the chairman to the old man by the door, "what do you know o' the rights o' this here business?"

On being thus addressed the old man started, and, focussing his wits, made answer volubly:

"Can't say as I know a great sight about it one way or t'other, Mr. Catchpull and gennlemen. I never heerd as that were common, though the children ollus played there of an evenin', and the women hung their washin' on the whins."

"Didn't your neighbour Grubb used to turn his donkey there to feed? I've heard a lot o' that."

"He done that, I know, but he ollus axed leave o' ta miller. He han't kept no dicky, not these last six years or more. They be a shanny, ignorant lot in this place, and can't see as the gennleman don't intend no malice. Dew he 'ouldn't come and meet 'em fair and square like this."

Mr. Harraby Vasey observed the witness with much wonder, his dreadful views appearing inconsistent with his mild address.

"We mean to do the best we can," said Mr. Catchpole. "If they can prove a claim, the Council is prepared to fight it, though we should have a job to get the money, thanks to Government. Ah, I should like to wring the necks of all them beauties!"

At this, the members of the Council laughed uproariously. One of them called out, "Go it, Mr. Chairman!" while the Atheist, appearing slightly shocked, exchanged glances with Mr. Harraby Vasey, who also was not privy to the joke.

"They did ought to give us the rates," pursued

the ex-policeman dauntlessly. "If the country's ever to look up, they'll have to separate it from the towns, and give it real self-government, not this stoopid nonsense. How much goes out of Lark-meadow each year for poor and highways, Army?"

The clerk, thus appealed to, looked up from a textbook he was studying, and said:

"I can't tell you to a penny, not this minute, but that's somewhere between twelve and thirteen hundred pounds."

"And how much of that is spent upon the parish?"

"They don't return us no account, so that's hard to judge. We've got one person in the workus, and seven in receipt of outdoor relief. Then there's the roads. . . . That's hard to tell, but five hundred pounds 'd be the outside in the worst o' years. But we have to contribute to help poorer parishes. There's places that have got five miles of first-class high-road."

"Well, let 'em give us only half. I'll warrant we'd do more'n they do now, with half the money! With six hundred a year behind us, we'd soon settle up this matter of the right-of-way."

"But there is no right of way, I can assure you," said Mr. Harraby Vasey in long-suffering tones.

"The gennleman know best, I dew think likely," exclaimed the Atheist, who had been highly flattered by the winks and private glances of intelligence with which the gentleman had honoured him during the discussion. "And that's sarten he mean only what be fair to all. That footpath bain't o'

no account to nobody. He only wish to show us what be right."

"Ah, here come some of 'em," cried Mr. Catchpole, chuckling, and silence fell, as everyone sat up and listened. Steps were heard approaching, and Mr. Meadows entered, grinning broadly.

"I ha' got tew on 'em; the others said they'd see me hanged and suffen else afore they'd set a foot inside the stinkin' school. I had some trouble to get these tew, I can tell ye!"

The two men, thus announced, stumped in with a defiant clatter of their hobnailed boots, and sat them down upon the form beside the Atheist. With hands placed squarely on their knees, with dogged looks, they faced the Council as men face disaster.

The Dodman wore a sleeved waistcoat and a pair of corduroy trousers strapped below the knee; his companion, who went fishing in the season, wore a blue reefer suit and silver ear-rings. Both sported highly coloured neckerchiefs. Mr. Harraby Vasey, as he watched their lowered faces, had a vision of wild cattle going to charge.

"Good-evening, Dodman; evenin', Harbut!" said Mr. Catchpole kindly, chuckling as he always did at awkward moments. "So you've just stepped in to tell us all about it?"

"We ha' come to hear what yow together got to say," replied the Dodman, with a non-committal air.

Mr. Catchpole turned to Mr. Harraby Vasey.

"Then will you begin, sir, since our friends here won't oblige?"

"Certainly." Mr. Harraby Vasey opened his

portfolio, put on his pince-nez, and expounded the whole case in simple language, supporting his statements by quotations from the papers, by consultation of the map spread out before him. In conclusion, he lowered his pince-nez and said earnestly :
“ So, you see, the facts are clear ; the land is private, and we can find no mention of a public path across it.”

“ That’s a lie !” The sudden interruption made him jump. It proceeded from the man of seafaring apparel, the impassive Harbut.

“ I beg your pardon—really—really !” faltered Mr. Harraby Vasey, greatly scandalized.

“ I say them papers be a dutty fake !” The objector did not move a muscle of his sullen face.

“ Be civil, Harbut !” chuckled Mr. Catchpole.

The Dodman supported his colleague. Removing a straw he had been chewing from his mouth, he said contemptuously :

“ Ta gennleman be a stranger hereabouts, and don’t know like what we do. That land’s common—ollus ha’ been.”

“ I’m willing to pay a fee for counsel’s opinion. . . .”

“ We don’t want no opinions for what’s known a’ready.”

“ Arter what the gennleman ha’ been a-tellin’ of us I don’t see no cause to doubt but what that’s private land. He couldn’t say no fairer than what he have done,” piped the Atheist.

“ What he’ve been a-sayin’ be a pack o’ leasin’. Can’t ye see that, ye nannockin’ ole fule ?”

“ That’s common land !”

Everyone began to talk at once. Harbut and the Dodman stood up, so did members of the Council. To swell the tumult, fresh voices sounded from outside the door, where others of the malcontents, it seemed, stood listening.

“That’s common land!”

“It’s no good trying to go on,” said Mr. Catchpole. “We’d best be going home. Keep close to me, sir!”

Though violence was in the air, Mr. Harraby Vasey felt no fear, his sensations being rather of disgust and pity. As he passed the door at Mr. Catchpole’s side, encountering the breath and stare of a small crowd of yokels, he once more had the vision of wild cattle charging. It caused a moment’s swimming of the brain. He closed his eyes, to reopen them upon the peaceful night enfolding shapes of trees and cottages with scattered lights. The clamour and brutality were left behind.

“We ha’n’t done much good to-night, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Catchpole, when they parted at his cottage-gate. “I’m sorry that they’re such a lot o’ dunder-heads. The best thing you can do is to mend that fence again and have it watched; then, if you catch one of ’em and prosecute, we might get along.”

“But if they wish to test the case they should send notice of their coming, and let me prosecute them in the proper course——”

“I know, sir—so they would to any other gentleman. But they reckon you’re a lawyer, and know all the tricks.”

“Well, I must see what I can do. Good-night.”

“Good-night, Mr. Catchpull,” chirped the Atheist, who clung to Mr. Harraby Vasey with adoring

fervour. He escorted him as far as the Grange drive-gate ; while Mr. Harraby Vasey, touched by the attention, questioned the poor old creature on his views and tastes.

The Atheist's real name, it seemed, was Stephen Pretious ; he was turned of seventy, and lived quite alone upon a small pension allowed him by one of his daughters who had married what he called a gentleman.

" I suppose you have a woman in to do the house-work for you ?" said Mr. Harraby Vasey, showing kindly interest.

" No, that I don't, and never will, and savin' your presence, sir, I can't abide old women—a schemin', crafty, superstitious lot! Their duzzly shriekin' git upon my narves. I keeps to myself, that's why they're all agin me. I sets and reads my newspaper and thinks my thoughts. That's suffen terrible, the ignorance in this here little place—you've seen to-night."

Mr. Harraby mentioned, with a sigh, his new conviction that the lot of the peasantry would be much bettered if the big estates were broken up.

" Oh, ah !" cried his companion eagerly ; " but there's other things need changin' afore that " ; and he went on to express a pious wish that all the churches could be turned into museums, and all the parsons put to honest work !

Mr. Harraby Vasey, though far from concurring in that sweeping judgment, deemed it unnecessary to express dissent ; and the Atheist, when parting from him at the lodge, thanked God that such a thinking gentleman had come to Larkmeadow.

XI

At Wimbledon Jerry's one idea had been flirtation—the pastime honoured of his male associates ; here in the country it was excellence in manly sports. Ethel encouraged this craze, as she had condemned the other, with more enthusiasm than she really felt. She went with him to Cloverfield, and watched his progress, with a view to praise, while basking in the adoration of the boys and Alice. And when she returned to London, she left him with these thrilling words :

“ Only practise, and I'm sure you will excel. I know you've got it in you.”

She had no conviction of the kind ; only her habit was to say nice things with winged glances ; but Jerry, as he left the railway-station, having seen her train steam out, had tears beneath his eyelids, and felt strong.

But without her stimulating presence, he began to doubt his fitness. The people whom he met at tennis with his cousins overshadowed him. One woman who was always there—Miss Trotter, from Cloverfield Rectory—had won renown in tennis tournaments, and played hockey for the county.

Pluming herself on a sarcastic gift, this lady did not scruple to make fun of his deficiencies. He

hated her, and shrugged his disbelief when Walter said : " She's really a good sort."

There were days when he felt sure that he would never make an athlete, and that nothing but pity restrained his cousins from telling him so. At such times, when he needed consolation, he felt disgusted by the apathy of Alice, whose duty, as a girl, it was to sympathize. She only spoke to him in bare politeness, and seemed to hate his efforts after friendship.

These emotions were confided to his mother, always indulgent, and to Mr. Catchpole, of whose friendship he was very proud. He was careful to conceal them from his father, who now sniffed at every mention of the Robert Vaseys, and only sanctioned Jerry's friendship with them in the belief that it was stamped with condescension.

Mr. Harraby Vasey was happily busy in making the acquaintance of his country neighbours. There were pleasant people in the market-town of Nornham, who dwelt in unassuming ancient houses, standing between the street and lovely gardens, unsuspected of the passer-by. All the clergy for miles round had called on him, as well as some half-dozen of the landed gentry. The tradesmen and the working classes paid him court. He was made an honorary member of five friendly societies and entertained at banquets by the local lodges, where his enlightened views on questions of the day provoked applause. He could look forward to a life of useful interest, and the trouble of the right-of-way resumed its true proportions in his mental outlook. He caused the fence to be repaired, and had it

watched, while he himself did all he could benignly to dispel the misconception which prevailed regarding it—paying calls at cottages ; talking much with Mr. Rush, whose charm of manner still enchanted him ; and in the mornings holding disputations on the heath with Mr. Catchpole, attended by the Atheist, who asked no better than to be his shadow. This last supported every word he said, and was of comfort to him in his wrangles with the ex-policeman, who had a way of saying “ Nonsense ! ” downright rudely, and a disrespectful trick of chuckling, which attacked the nerves.

Two incidents occurred about this time to increase his disillusion with his farmer cousin. Lord Mells came to the Grange one afternoon—he was a widower, so had no lady to pay calls for him—and made himself exceedingly agreeable. Mr. Harraby Vasey was enraptured with him until after tea, when, walking round the grounds, his lordship said :

“ Mr. Vasey, I don’t know if you are interested in your family history, but I have documents by which it can be traced a long way back. Ever since Queen Elizabeth’s time the Vaseys have been associated with my people. A Vasey was steward of the estate in 1690. The earliest mention of the name which I have found in these parts is in a deed of Richard II. which I have in my possession. It refers to one Roger ‘de Vasey, Lord of Beddisford. I myself am deeply interested in old families, particularly those connected with my own. It has been my lifelong study, and I am afraid I sometimes weary people when I ride my hobby. The vicissi-

tudes of old families are amazing. At least a third of our labourers have good Norman surnames. I shall be happy to show you the documents at any time, and if you care to have them copied I will lend them to you. . . .”

So that was the true purpose of his visit! Mr. Harraby Vasey breathed relief when he was gone, and in his soul reflected: “Hang the fellow!” To remind a man, in every sense his equal, of his humble forebears; to show that he was interested in him solely as a product of “the estate”! Mr. Harraby Vasey had imagined peers of the realm to be, as a general rule, well-mannered persons. His lordship must be perfectly aware that gentlemen do not nowadays allude to things like ancestry, no longer regarding them as material to their judgment of a man.

When Jerry, returning from Cloverfield in time for dinner, heard of Lord Mells’ visit, he cried out:

“It’s just my luck! Walter tells me he’s a ripping sort—no side at all. I’d have asked him to let me fish in his lake.”

“You have no need to ask favours, boy,” said his father, with impatience. “If there is good fishing to be had in the neighbourhood, I am perfectly willing to hire it for you.”

“Oh, thanks awfully! I’ll have a good look round and let you know,” said Jerry, colouring with pleasure at this handsome offer.

“And I don’t care for your going to Cloverfield so often. I had rather that you asked your cousins here.”

" I'll try. But everything's much better there."

" Eh ?" He was questioned sharply.

" Well, I don't mean exactly better, but more business-like. Here there's a lot of fuss and ceremony ; there we simply play. I can't explain."

" We won't appear at all if your cousins find us terrible," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, laughing, with a trace of grievance. " But for the next few days I want you here at home to help me with some measurements I'm going to make."

" All right," said Jerry, looking rather glum.

It was in connection with those measurements that the second incident befell. Mr. Harraby Vasey stood one morning upon the brow of the heath overlooking the village, with Jerry, Mr. Catchpole, and the Atheist, when Robert drove along the road below. Espying them, he gave the reins to his son Walter. The party had just ascertained, by measuring, that the path across the heath from point to point was longer by full fifty yards than by the road, and Mr. Harraby Vasey triumphed. It followed, as he pointed out, that the footpath could in no respect be called an easement.

" So I shall have this land cleared presently, and double-dug for my plantations," he had said decisively ; and Mr. Catchpole was replying, " You'll do what you like, of course," when Robert Vasey joined them, out of breath.

Jerry ran down into the road to talk to Walter. The Atheist, knuckling his forehead, withdrew to a respectful distance.

" You haven't taken my advice, I see," said the intruder. " You've gone and mended that

fence. Well, some folks won't be guided ; but you'll see !"

"I do not see at present, I confess," was Mr. Harraby Vasey's mild rejoinder. "Everything is going smoothly. I have taken measures."

"Oh, I know you've set a police watch. But what good's that ? The job is to get rid of the ill-feeling. I heard of your conciliation meeting, which, of course, failed. You keep the agitation going when you'd better let it die."

"I called that meeting, sir," said Mr. Catchpole. "I felt as if the parish council must do something. I wished to see if there was any ground for us to go to law upon against our friend here."

"The parish council—go to law ? A cow's as fit ! Wake up, man ! It's a dream—your parish council !" The farmer smote the dreamer on the shoulder. "There's nothing like it in the world, nor ever will be. I've heard you on that before——"

"Of course, I may be wrong," said Mr. Harraby Vasey.

"Of course you are," replied his cousin ; "but we won't quarrel for so little, so good luck to you !"

Meanwhile Jerry, with a hand upon the splash-board of the gig, had heard from Walter :

"The governor says you're in for a row here. Lucky dog ! There's never any fun like that at our place." This was new light to Jerry, and he blinked a little ere he got accustomed to it. "When is the police watch raised ? To-morrow week ? Well, just you watch that night yourself ; they're sure to come."

"You really think so ? I must tell my father.

They think of going away on Thursday for a fortnight. I should be alone."

"So much the better! Don't you say a word! Ask us over, and we'll have a lark. I haven't used my fists in earnest since I don't know when! It'll be our farewell spree, for, you know, we're all dispersing to the ends of the earth next month. There'll only be Charley and Alice left at home."

"Right you are!" said Jerry, with a sudden smile. "To-morrow week, then—after dinner—all of you!"

"Done!" said Walter. "If the governor's at home that night I shall have to say you asked us for a moonlight picnic—if there is a moon!"

"Suppose it rains!"

"Oh, then you asked us to play billiards!"

"Right you are!"

The farmer's return cut short the interview. Jerry went back on to the heath and joined his father. When, having said good-bye to Mr. Catchpole and the Atheist, they sauntered home to lunch, Mr. Harraby Vasey lectured his son gently upon the subject of discrimination in the choice of friends.

"Everyone should seek his friends among his equals—or superiors—and in saying that, I do not speak of social rank. I reckon all men equal in a general way—but of education and refinement. One has to dread a coarsening of the fibres . . ."

Jerry listened with sincere desire to profit, taking the lecture to concern his conduct when he went to Cambridge. But Mr. Harraby Vasey's eye was on the present. He had learnt that morning, from

words uttered in his presence, that his only son had been to tea at Mr. Catchpole's cottage ; and Jerry's eagerness to run and talk to Walter Vasey had seemed to him excessive and derogatory. The boy was unaffected ; he feared to spoil the youthful frankness which was half his charm ; and yet he could not feel quite happy when he saw such tendencies. Heredity is a strange thing. And with so many rustic forebears, who could tell what tastes and sympathies might lurk in Jerry's nature, needing tactful care ?

XII

IT was a soft September night without a moon. Jerry waited at the drive-gate, framed in fir-trees. A lighted window at the lodge shed light behind him, but before him was a blackness hiding everything. The veiled earth seemed to slumber and to breathe perceptibly. Out of the distance came mysterious noises ; the church clock in the town of Nornham, three miles off, was heard across the marshes striking nine.

It was the hour appointed by his cousins, and Jerry, seeing they did not arrive, began to mix anxiety with his excitement. But soon the lights of several bicycles came flitting down the road, and stopped before the gate. He hailed them with a whoop. Shaking hands with Walter, then with Ned, and Tom, and Roger—

“ Why, how many of you are there ? ” he exclaimed. “ I thought you said that Charley wouldn’t come.”

“ But Alice would,” said Ned, a little ruefully. “ She’s game for anything. The governor’s away, and auntie’s the right sort. Where can we stick our bikes out of the way ? ”

Jerry wished to relieve Alice of her bicycle, but she withstood him, seeming to resent the small attention. When the machines had been bestowed,

the lamps extinguished, Jerry led the way to a spot which he had chosen as commanding the disputed piece of fence—a little nest among the fir-trees on the slope up towards the heath.

“ We’re in good time,” said Walter. “ Our men won’t come until the pubs shut ; that’s another hour.”

“ I guess I’ll smoke a pipe,” said Ned contentedly.

“ Then go behind a bush and light it,” said his elder brother. Jerry tingled to this note of true adventure. The presence of Alice, also, made the watch romantic. He felt a curious longing for her notice, with which ambition he made overtures : expressed a fear lest she felt cold—the ground was damp ; offered to fetch out rugs and cushions from the house—all wrong, as usual, evidently, for he got short answers. All ears whenever she addressed her brothers, he knew for the first time that she had a thrilling voice.

“ Hush !” said Ned suddenly.

Footsteps sounded on the road ; they passed and died away, when conversation was resumed, at first in whispers. There was no moon, but as the night advanced, the mist of darkness seemed to lift from off the meadows, and trees could be discerned a long way off. Indeed, the darkness had acquired a strange distinctness, as if the landscape had been carved in ebony. A night-jar whirred ; a dog barked in the distance ; voices from the village came by caprice of the air around the hill. A noise of hoof-beats and the roll of heavy wheels made them silent once again, while some belated cart went jogging by. Then came the distant

rumble of a train, muted a moment, then enlarging to a roar.

"That's the 10.10 at Nornham," observed Walter Vasey. "The pubs are shutting now. . . . Good Lord! We're on the wrong side of the fence. They'll come along the road! What fools we are!"

"Of course! I never thought of that!" said Jerry, shame-faced. Of instinct he had put the fence between himself and danger. As he led them to the gate and out into the road, he imagined that the others were disgusted with him. What must Alice think? Behind him he could hear her talking in low tones with Ned and Roger, no doubt remarking on his lack of courage.

"Ask him!" said Ned, with something in his mouth impeding speech.

"Will you have some chocolate?" Alice's voice beside him startled Jerry. She was holding out a paper packet, just discernible.

"Rather!" he answered, and subjoined: "Thanks awfully!" completely rehabilitated by the little ceremony.

"Now, Alice, if they come, you're to stand clear," said Walter. "You know you promised; that's why we let you come."

"Oh, man, don't worry so!" she answered, laughing.

Opposite the mended fence across the road the hedge was high, and spread commodious shade. There they ensconced themselves anew, and watched and waited. The minutes passed, and no marauders came. The lights in cottage windows were put out.

"It looks as if they'd funk'd the job," groaned Walter.

But even as he spoke they heard approaching voices. A group of some ten persons came in sight, advancing leisurely. A lantern swung among them near the ground. They made straight for the fence, the lantern-bearer leading.

"Tak yow ta light, Harbut ; hold that high and steady, now. Where's that there saw ?"

With heartsome shouts the Vaseys sprang across the road, and Jerry's heart beat in his brain. Charging and hitting blindly, he knew nothing, till all at once he saw the bumpkins in full flight. The victors gave a "Yah !"

But that derisive shout renewed the battle. The yokels, in their first surprise, had thought that the police were their assailants ; but, hearing sounds of impish glee, they stopped and turned.

"It's them there Vasey boys fro' Cloverfel," one shouted. "Come back. We'll teach young fules to mell in things what don't consarn 'em."

The hobnail host came on once more with resolution. The bearer of the lantern marched right up to Ned, remarking : "I'm a-goin' to change yer face for yow, young blow-broth !" Ned kicked the lantern from his hand ; the light went out, and then ensued a scene remembrance of which was Jerry's nightmare for weeks afterwards. He hit out straight before him with his eyes shut. The yokels closed on him ; he was half-stifled with rank odours as of cattle. Someone bawled out :

"Dew yow keep 'em happy, whiles I mend ta fence."

Walter Vasey shouted coolly : " No, you don't ! "

It struck Jerry as miraculous that anyone could keep his wits amid the tumult, much less hold his ground ; yet two of his cousins seemed to be victorious. Ned went down. Jerry was down, too, the next minute, knocked clean off his feet by a sledgehammer blow on the chest. Two ruffians fell upon him, and began to pound him, reiterating : " We'll sune larn ye ! "

" A foul ! " cried Alice from the hedge. " Here, close to me ! They're two to one at Jerry, when he's down ! "

A rush from Walter, a skilled bruiser, rescued Jerry, who, as his wits returned, heard whispers : " They ha' got a gel among 'em ! " " Hew can that be ? " " We'll sune find out ! "

Two men went up to Alice, who hit out at them.

" Ah ! would yer, stingy ? Gently, or I'll make ye sorry. I'm just a-goin' to look at yow, my dear. "

Jerry charged. Alice had already thrown off one assailant, who was spread against the hedge. Jerry flung himself upon this person, ground his face into the quickset, and, passing on, attacked the other with whom Alice struggled.

The man let go and fled.

" I know you ! You're Fred Smith ! " yelled Jerry, speeding his departure. It was a great relief to take it out of somebody, he himself had been so lately terrified and roughly handled. " You shall pay for this ! And so shall the others. I know who you are ! "

This menace, heard of all, ended the fighting.

which already languished. Some of the yokels, fearing that the tumult would awake the village, had drawn off, calling to the rest. The news that Jerry was among the champions of the fence extinguished their last spark of martial fire.

"Old Skinflint's son? He know us? I'm a-goin' home," their leader growled.

But Jerry's thoughts were all for Alice.

"I hope they haven't hurt you?" he asked anxiously.

"No, thank you; not a bit," was the reply.

He persisted in inquiries; she grew irritable, and exclaiming, "Don't be silly!" moved to join her brothers. It was then that he perceived the field was won.

"Well, that was a good breather! You did jolly well," said Walter Vasey, clapping Jerry on the shoulder.

"Come in, now, and have some supper," was the answer.

Jerry led them to the house and turned on the electric light in hall and dining-room. The servants were in bed, but the table had been laid in readiness by his direction. He was going himself to fetch the beer which was demanded, when Alice murmured:

"May I wash my hand?" and showed a blood-stained pocket-handkerchief. "I've cut it somehow. The tap in the back-house will do splendidly."

Telling her brothers where to find the beer, Jerry himself conducted her into the scullery. She had got a nasty slash across three fingers. It had hap-

pened in the struggle, she could not tell how. When he insisted on getting a clean handkerchief and bandaging the wound, she cried out, "Don't!" and seemed unhappy, but submitted in the end. Then they went in to supper, and he eyed her with a new amazement, never having seen a girl drink beer before. He wondered whether she disliked him really, or was only shy.

It was after one o'clock when they departed. Jerry went to bed, still too excited to be conscious of a bad black eye and other bruises which he carried. When Grain, the butler, called him in the morning, he brought the tidings that the fence was cut again!

XIII

"WELL, you're a nice young man, you are!" said Mr. Catchpole, his face inflamed with mirth, to Jerry, who had stopped before his cottage-gate. The ex-policeman sat upon a home-made bench against the wall, with nothing but a narrow flower-bed and some three-foot pales between him and publicity as represented by the village street. It was his way to make an evident home of any ground he chose to occupy, and take his ease in view of the community.

He chuckled and replaced his pipe between his teeth, still keeping a derisive eye on Jerry. "Here have your dear father been a-blaming everyone because he can't find out who done that job the other night, and never thinking to inquire at home. He mentioned your black eye, too—said you'd had a fall. I hope you haven't been a-telling wicked stories!"

"I had a fall," said Jerry, with defiance.

"I know you did, and Twister and Joe Tarpen on the top of you. That's the talk of Larkmedder; and they're pleased with you for not telling. But if I was you, young man, I wouldn't join them others, not in all their games. You ain't the build of what I call a proper rowdy."

"I've had no practice."

"Practice! What for? To fight along o' black-guards? . . . They're nice chaps, your cousins, but they're not your make. They wouldn't care a rap if they was killed to-morrow; a nose broke or a tooth out wouldn't worry them. You kept indoors three days account o' your black eye."

"Because I hate being stared at."

"That's just what I'm a-saying. You can't bear to spoil your beauty. And there's no doubt but what that is uncommon. Katey think so!"

"You shut up!"

"Well, you mind what I say. You're off to Cloverfield, I guess, as usual. When do Mr. Roger start for India?"

"To-day, worse luck! and Tom goes back to Cooper's Hill directly, and Ned and Walter go to Scotland to some engineering works. There'll soon be no one left."

He heaved a mournful sigh, for, now that it was over, the open-air existence with his cousins seemed Elysian. It would be no fun going to the farm when only Charles and Alice stayed there, the former always busy, and the latter cold.

At home he found no joy in dissertations on the heath and politics—two subjects which exclusively engaged his father's mind—or in his sister's intellectual talks with Alfred Bredbane. Mr. Harraby Vasey, while in London, had, for precaution, taken counsel's opinion in the matter of the right-of-way, which opinion fell much short of his desires. The friend who gave it had advised him strongly to keep out of court, since the case was one admitting of extensive argument. This hint prevented him

from showing anger when the fence was cut a second time, thereby embroiling him with Mr. Catchpole, who adored conclusions.

"Let 'em know that if they're caught you'll pay the fine for them," the latter urged. "Then mend the fence, and let 'em cut it in your presence. The parish council can't do nothing till the question's raised."

"The parish council can do nothing, anyhow. You'd lose the case, and have to bear all costs."

"That's what we want to see. You mend that fence, and I'll talk round them chaps to cut that openly. I like to see the things tackled fair and straight."

But Mr. Harraby Vasey had espoused a cooler policy. By taking it for granted that the land was his, despite all depredations and assertions to the contrary, and waiting for a favourable time before he acted, he quite believed that he would win the day. Besides, the whole affair appeared a mole-hill amid the field of wider, more ambitious interests opened out by his change of politics. Bredbane had helped him with applause and sympathy to take up an advanced position, which he never would have reached without such aid. Bredbane pointed to the local Radicals without a leader, and thrilled him with desire to be their head. When Bredbane was not at hand, Mr. Harraby Vasey argued these high matters with his wife and daughter. Jerry, thus condemned to seek his own diversions, found nothing to distract him from the thought of Cambridge; and the prospect of going up alone, without

one friend, alarmed him greatly as the time drew near.

He sought the company of Mr. Catchpole, and with him took rambles under autumn skies, through fields of stubble and of dark-leaved beet, across lean pastures, where the thistledown was flying fast. He poured his griefs in his companion's ear, and listened to his consolations, but without relief. He had come to a full stop in life, and craved for comfort of a tender sort, or, if that were not obtainable, for some amusement to prevent his brooding on the coming trial.

One day, as he and Mr. Catchpole were returning home, they met a pretty girl out walking all alone. Dressed with more regard to fashion than was usual with the village maidens, she stepped self-consciously, and smiled at them in passing. Mr. Catchpole nodded.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked Jerry. "You'd never guess! That's Dodman's daughter, Nelly. Some different to her father—eh? She's in a shop in Ipswich."

Five minutes later, having shaken off the expoliceman, Jerry was speeding in pursuit of the said Nelly. He came up with her in a quiet lane. She beamed upon him as an old friend might, exclaiming: "Here you are! A blessing! I was feeling cruel dull." They sauntered off into the fields together in a natural way.

She was pretty and good-natured, and her eyes said plainly that she liked the look of him. He had found the pastime needed to divert his thoughts from dwelling too much on a painful prospect. The

sense of being up to mischief braced his nerves. She chattered freely, and he found her talk instructive, illuminating paths of life till then obscure.

"It's hard at home," she told him; "father's that particular. I must be in when he is, or he'd know the reason why. If he thought I went with you, he'd about kill me!"

Jerry laughing at the comic picture of the Dodman as a Puritan, she assured him gravely:

"That's the fact. He'd take the strap to me when I was little for an idle word; and he can't see that us young folks need a bit of fun occasionally. He's worse than parsons sometimes, the stern way he talk."

The fear which she expressed repeatedly, lest her papa should get an inkling of her present naughtiness, enlivened all their meetings with a spice of danger. For a fortnight Jerry found enjoyment in these stolen sweets, till one day Nell proposed that they should go away together. That alarmed him. He instantly invented a vague tale of fear, his father threatening, which made it best for them to say "Good-bye." They parted then and there, with tears on her side.

XIV

THE fence beside the road was left unmended for the present, and Mr. Harraby Vasey relinquished his intention of having ground prepared for new plantations on the heath. One thing he did: he had two posts set up at the point where the disputed path abutted on the village street, and a gate hung between—a diplomatic move which, while asserting ownership, admitted the existence of a path just there. He quite expected this new work to be destroyed. But most of the village braves had gone to Lowestoft to seek employment in the autumn fishery, and the Dodman did not care to act alone.

Mr. Ditcher contented himself with going to the gate one chill, grey morning, and leaning on it, pipe in mouth, a lurcher dog reposing at his feet, in wait for someone from the Grange to hear his judgment. Jerry came. At sight of Nelly's father holding the gate against him in a threatening way, he thought the vengeance for misdeeds had come upon him, and so approached her parent cringingly, wished him good-day, inquired his opinion of the weather, and spoke the praises of the lurcher dog.

Prepared for strife, the Dodman was completely nonplussed. Knowing nothing of his daughter's business, he ascribed the young man's cordiality

to an affection for himself, and, something touched, made answer civilly, forgetting his purpose of contention till too late.

But these were facts beneath the cognizance of Mr. Harraby Vasey, who, seeing his new gate respected, and with Jerry safe at Cambridge, felt at peace. He came to view the bumpkins with complete indulgence. They were not to blame for their unreason, he agreed with Bredbane; they had always been downtrodden and maintained in ignorance. It was the duty of men raised above their darkness to hold a light for them and help them up. To this end he displayed a kindness which enriched the parish, and sought to be on friendly terms with everyone. The signs of popularity which he received impelled him on to fresh exertions of benevolence, and each exertion brought him fresh applause. Attending a parish council meeting early in December, he was delighted with the cordiality of his reception. The Atheist was there, though not a member, simply, it appeared, to sing his praises; and his colleagues made him welcome as a trusted friend.

Business had just begun, when the door opened, and the Vicar entered, asking leave to warm himself. He had been visiting some sick person, and carried a book beneath his arm.

"Sit ye down, sir," chuckled Mr. Catchpole; adding, for Mr. Harraby Vasey's ear: "Just look at Atheist!"

In truth, Mr. Pretious evinced strange excitement; a spirit and a light had entered into him. With gaze expressive of a cruel purpose, he edged

along the forms until he could confront the clergyman ; then, leaning forward, touched the book the latter had laid down.

“ Now, that there book ! ”—the Vicar turned his face at this apostrophe, still holding out his chilled hands to the fire—“ there’s things in that as don’t seem right to me. That’s all agen the poor by what I see on ’t, teachin’ us to fare content wi’ ta state o’ life unto which it ha’ pleased God to call us ! ”

“ ‘ Unto which it shall please God to call me ’ : those are the exact words,” rejoined the parson wearily. “ They are taught to rich and poor alike, as children, with their lives before them.”

“ Well, I ha’ ollust heerd that said ta other way. But there’s a lot o’ nonsense no one can’t make head nor tail on. Now, I’ll trouble yow, sir, to tell me : Hew were Cain’s wife ? ”

“ Oh, come off that, Atheist, do, for goodness ! ” chuckled Mr. Catchpole. “ That’s what they give ’em of an evenin’ up the Mile End Road. A lot o’ rubbish, findin’ fault with what don’t matter anyhow.”

“ Well, the gennleman can’t answer my question, and no more can’t none on ye ! ” said Mr. Pretious, with triumphant rubbing of his hands.

“ Don’t want to ! ” giggled Mr. Meadows. “ Save yer breath ! ”

The business of the council then proceeded to its end, when Mr. Catchpole took up his accustomed plaint against the Government. Why had the County Council all the power, the parish none ? And why had every man a vote for Parliament, yet no control of what he knew and cared about ? It

ought to be the other way. Each parish council ought to have a settled income, enabling it to talk on equal terms with landowners. All could be settled friendly in a village, but once outside, you got to party politics.

"Go on, bo'! You're as good as Atheist!" laughed Mr. Meadows.

"Then there's the unions. What are they doing in the country districts? Simply standing there and costing money. There's our workus there at Barnham, built to hold twelve hundred, fully staffed, and only a hundred and fifty in it by the last report. That ought to be done away with and the land sold. And these here Old Age Pensions that the Tories talk of. They would come natural if the parish had the rates."

The Vicar, who had heard in silence, here put in :

"You remind me of a tale I heard some years ago. An engineer, employed to drain unhealthy marshes on the coast of Africa, came to a great lagoon beside the sea, divided from it by a bank of shingle. He had the bank cut, and encamped to watch the water running out, delighted with the thought of his improvement. All at once, to his horror, he saw a fleet of canoes with natives in them, caught in the current that was rushing towards the sea. It was useless to attempt to save them. He had the horror of seeing a whole tribe of harmless people carried past him to their death amid the surf! So, when attacking old abuses, Mr. Catchpole, bear in mind the harmless folk who live by fishing in those stagnant waters."

The aged Vicar rose and buttoned up his thread-

bare overcoat. His face was red through shame of having spoken or else of the applause his speech evoked.

"He told that story well," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, after he was gone. "Why does he read such dull stuff from the pulpit?"

"He were a rare man once," said Mr. Meadows ruefully. "But now he can't dew much, he live so low. I reckon this here fire's ta fust he seen to-day."

"I repent as I did take and vex ta poor old dear," suspired the Atheist.

"You don't mean he's so poor as that?" cried Mr. Harraby Vasey, greatly shocked.

"I don't say, mind ye, as he's right down starvin', but he don't ha' more than just enough to keep a-dewin'. That's a long story. He had to pay dilapidations when he come here; and the livin' ain't a great sight; and he've got a daughter married to some good-for-nawn as ha' bled the pore ole critter suffen crool, and still dew, I b'lieve! He let the garden for the upkeep, and have a woman in to tidy twice a week. I been his warden ever since he come here."

"Dear me, dear me!" said Mr. Harraby Vasey. "I must ask him to dine often at the Grange."

"He 'on't dew that, sir," tittered Mr. Meadows; and Mr. Catchpole added: "I ha' seen a lot o' cases up in London—clean curtains in the winder, and a hanging flower-pot or a bird-cage, and indoors nothing but starvation misery. They're proud to the death, some on 'em, and keep up appearances."

“ Ah ! that’s the sort. They take a lot o’ breakin’,” murmured the rustic audience with a kind of relish which struck the town-bred listener as very gruesome.

Born in conventions, nourished on ideas and theories, valuing men for wealth, or witty speech, or charm of manner, Mr. Harraby Vasey was perpetually astonished by the country love of human nature stripped and crude. He felt sometimes as if these creatures had a sense he lacked. However that might be, he could, and did, feel great compassion for the clergyman, against whom he had frequently inveighed as worse than useless, possessing no influence with the flock entrusted to him, and never seen except in church on Sundays. He called at the Vicarage on the following day. Shown into a study, neat, if not luxurious, he jumped with vast relief to the conclusion that the rumour of the old man’s destitution was exaggerated. His aim in coming was to persuade the Vicar to preside at sundry gaieties which he and Mrs. Harraby Vasey were devising for the Christmas season—notably a school treat and a parish tea—and, being deaf to all refusals, he obtained his will.

“ That do anyone good to see you, sir, you look that comfortable,” said Mr. Catchpole, meeting him on his way home.

And, as a fact, he was extremely comfortable. It was just what he had hoped for in the country—this sense of neighbourhood, of homely kindness, of one heart warming all the parish like a cheerful fire. He walked about the village in his fur-lined coat, consulting Mr. Rush about some hampers to

be filled with groceries ; Mr. Catchpole on the destination of some gifts of coals and blankets ; attended always by the Atheist in ecstasy.

Bredbane might laugh at all that charitable turmoil, and accuse him of intent to pauperize the place : Bredbane himself was drawn into its vortex ; was made to take an active part in preparations, and even help to decorate the church, by Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who had quite enslaved him. Lazy, plump, good-tempered, comely, she personified the comfort he enjoyed at Larkmeadow. Only to look at her conveyed to him luxurious ease, with innocence and loving-kindness, as his own—pure breaths of Heaven to the jaded demagogue who kept the taste of all life's vileness in his mouth. She had sympathized with him and Beryl in those days when Mr. Harraby Vasey would not hear of their engagement, and now proclaimed sincere affection for him. In return, he loved her, and preferred her amiable, brainless chatter to real conversation—a weakness Beryl noted with incredulous amazement.

XV

THE possession of two sisters more attractive than herself had from an early age made Beryl serious. When, at twenty, she was bridesmaid to her sister Daphne, aged eighteen, and had consolatory words addressed to her, she found the world in need of reconstruction. She was good-looking in a cool, proud style, demanding worship with a glance that froze the worshipper. Disillusioned, she took refuge in an arrogant languor, in pessimistic and eclectic reading, and contemned her family. She was not ill-natured, only over-earnest. A cynical detachment seemed to her sincerity, community of tastes the basis of the only love worth having ; and her opinions always had the force of living faith. It was therefore with a thrill that she found Alfred Bredbane paying court to her, seeing in him the incarnation of her grievance with the world. She knew his published works, and they expressed her feelings. Her father's strong objection to the match, when first proposed, had roused her mind to champion Alfred till he seemed a demigod.

But now, beholding how he revelled in the very atmosphere of wealth and comfort he denounced so well, she felt defrauded. Anyone observing his behaviour at the Grange would have judged him

quite an ordinary individual. What had happened? She marked her displeasure by avoiding him—he never noticed; she tried by meaning looks to stir his conscience—but in vain.

When Jerry came for Christmas, bringing Ethel Harraby, whom he had met in London, Beryl was glad, and made a fuss of him—another hint to Alfred which went quite unheeded. And Jerry, being full of Cambridge doings, at first asked nothing better than a listener. But Beryl stuck to him when he was tired of her, made an unwelcome third in walks with Ethel, and prevented him from spending half his time with Mr. Catchpole, as he wished to do. She was five years his elder, mindful of the fact, and dealt in admonitions and reproofs. It was tiresome to be told, however sweetly, that he ought not always to have a pipe in his mouth, that to slouch about with hands in pockets spoilt his figure, or that he drank more wine at dinner than was right at his age.

“I wish she wouldn’t worry me!” he said to Ethel. “Old Beryl always was inclined to jaw. Why can’t she keep with Bredbane? Sulking, I suppose. I wish they’d make it up and give us peace.”

The trouble reached a head on New Year’s Eve, when there was a party at the Grange, including several children. These had a separate room for games and dances, which Ethel ordered, with the help of Alice Vasey. Beryl, looking in to see how things were going, found Alfred on his hands and knees, with youngsters riding on him, Alice and Ethel looking on in fits of laughter.

"How can you!" she exclaimed, past patience, and retired at once, slamming the door behind her angrily. She went into the empty hall, and sank into a chair there, fanning herself assiduously, though the place was none too warm.

"Beryl," she heard his voice beseeching, "what's the matter?"

"The matter? Your behaving like an idiot! Jerry is a man beside you! I never dreamt that you could be so foolish. It's bad enough to see you always at my father's beck and call, agreeing to everything he says, eating all your opinions, making me look silly, after all I've said about you. But I never dreamt—— In front of Ethel, too, and Alice! How can anyone respect you? In fact, it comes to this—you'll do anything—degrade yourself in any way—to please anyone—except me. You never think of me at all!"

"Not think of you! My dearest!" murmured Bredbane, while he thought at lightning speed. So she was despotic, was she, as well as cold and literary? A girl who could not let a man be natural for a minute was ill adapted for a life's companion. It was his fault for posing to her at the first. Looking round that admirably furnished hall, watching the well-trained servants come and go, he realized how dear she was to him. There was nothing for it but to scramble back on to his office-stool, which she persisted in regarding as a throne, and improvise.

Appealing to the worldly wisdom she assumed, he asked her in what manner she expected him to treat her father, on whom their future lot in life

depended, since she objected to an attitude of deference? Her father had said that they must wait to marry until he (Bredbane) should secure some life-provision—a thing by no means easy to obtain in journalism. The reason given was that he already had two sons-in-law dependent on him in America, both of whom had married on precarious earnings and the high hopes natural to a sanguine temperament, and that he had no wish for further worries of the kind. By winning his good opinion, by giving proof of brains and industry, he (Bredbane) had aspired to overcome this little prejudice. Was that so wrong? And then, again, she must remember that he was the servant of a cause, and, as such, bound to nurse her father's new convictions.

"But a Liberal is not a Socialist," she interjected.

"A child is not a man," he answered, laughing. "Come, Beryl, would you like to hear a secret?" He noted her awakened interest with satisfaction. "Your father would not like my telling, so don't breathe a word. He thinks of standing for the county. I'm going to pull the wires for him in London. Isn't that worth knowing?"

Ethel and Alice just then came into the hall, escorted by a crowd of noisy children.

Beryl and Alfred rose of one accord. He whispered: "You must take me, please, for what I am—a poor thing, but your own devotedly."

Beryl, without a word, went up to Ethel. He wondered if she ever could unbend, supposing that her heart were touched, and not her brain. Her

face and figure were sufficiently seductive to make him wish to God she were less cold.

"Let me take my turn with the children," she made offer, smiling. "You and Alice must have had enough of them. Alfred will help me." She gave Alfred a bright look, informing him that this was her amends.

"Have you seen the Vicar anywhere?" exclaimed Mr. Harraby Vasey, coming on them suddenly. "The man's so shy; I fear he must have fled. And he's had nothing to eat or drink." One of the servants said that he had left the house. "Why did you let him go? You should have stopped him!" Mr. Harraby Vasey could not get over his vexation at the priest's escape.

Ethel found Jerry in the dining-room, where there was dancing, and soon became his partner in a waltz.

"Those two have made it up at last," she told him. "So little Jerry won't have any more kind lectures. By-the-by, I've got to lecture you myself. Why weren't you nice to Alice when I made you bring her here to dance?"

"What's that?" asked Jerry.

"You talked of Cambridge—very fine, no doubt; but, never having been there, and not knowing any of your friends, she couldn't naturally see the fun like you do. Nor can I. It was the same thing yesterday, at Cloverfield. I could see the boys were bored to death by all your anecdotes."

"You might have given me a hint," said Jerry, shattered.

He had, indeed, talked Cambridge at all seasons

and to everybody with a complacency like that of the returned explorer. Mr. and Mrs. Catchpole and Katey had entered into his account with zest. That other people might not find it interesting had not struck him.

“I’ll never say a word again!” he vowed, with bitterness.

XVI

ON the 30th of January Mr. Harraby Vasey opened a bazaar in connection with the Congregational Church in Nornham, and Beryl, who attended him on that occasion, felt queen-like as she sat beside him on the platform, holding a bouquet which had been presented to her. The speech he made then, almost Socialistic in its tenor, was reported in the county papers, and caused a small sensation in the neighbourhood.

"So you're a Radical, I hear," said Robert Vasey, who met him in the town a few days later, eyeing him as men regard strange freaks of Nature. "The first I ever heard of in the family! Old Cousin Sarah didn't know that when she made her will. She'd spit fire at the mention of a Liberal. . . . Not a pro-Boer, I do hope, anyhow?"

No, Mr. Harraby Vasey called himself a Liberal Imperialist, though he held advanced views upon certain problems of domestic government—views he now aired at every opportunity. He made more friends than he disgusted by this declaration. His speech, and a large subscription towards a chapel organ fund, had enchanted all the Nonconformists in the district; and the Liberal gentry, few and far between, now rallied to him, holding out the hand of friendship. The public mourning for the death

of Queen Victoria put a stop to his activities for several weeks. At sight of him, attired in faultless black, attending the memorial service at the parish church, his wife's trust in his faith and loyalty, severely shaken by the chapel episode, was re-established. She had a gentle horror of Dissent, and sighed :

"Till lately you were always a good Churchman!"

"So I am, my dear," he answered; "but not bigoted. Those people asked me to preside at their bazaar, not as a religious man, but as a politician—since they share my views. I saw, and still see, nothing to prevent my doing so."

Against his change of politics she raised no protest, though she herself was born and bred Conservative. The home, her province, was as pleasant as before—nay, more so, for the new acquaintances were less stilted.

Of these the greatest acquisition was a family named Tavan, who rented Uffield Park—a show place in the county. The father had begun life as a London shopkeeper, and was now the head of an enormous retail business; the mother won the heart of Mrs. Harraby Vasey by the homeliness she had preserved in spite of wealth; the daughters seemed well-bred, agreeable girls. There was, besides, an only son, one Eric, but lately invalided home from South Africa, where he had seen service in the Imperial Yeomanry. On the day when she first called at Uffield Park Beryl knew that she attracted this good-looking youth, and did her best to snub him; for she loathed his type, which was that of men who in old days had loved her sisters. Think-

ing to rouse his anger, she inveighed against the war in Alfred's manner. He replied quite meekly :

"That's beyond me. I don't pretend to judge the right and wrong. I just went out because more men were called for, and because I felt a slacker lounging round at home. I can understand, though, how it puts off clever people, the way the jingoes yell and dance and talk of heroes. Why, I'd done nothing, yet the yokels here turned out and cheered me—made me feel an utter worm."

His mind was humble ; the discovery surprised her greatly, since she associated his appearance with robust conceit. There was something pathetic in his frank confession of stupidity ; his awe of her superior intelligence ; his gratitude for any crumbs she chose to throw to him. He had a motor-car—till then his only love—and proclaimed himself the happiest man alive when she consented to be taken for a drive in it. His diffidence was most becoming, though it made her smile. For Alfred as her choice he had great reverence, hanging on his every word, with blessings on his luck in knowing two such geniuses.

"If I'm in your way, just tell me," he entreated. "I'm not up to your mark, I know, but I feel it does me good to listen to you. Just regard me as your chauffeur—it's about all I'm fit for—and order me and the car round when you want us."

She soon began to hold him in affection, and felt quite hurt when her betrothed made fun of him. Mr. Harraby Vasey, too, struck up a friendship with the elder Tavan, and the families were soon on terms of intimacy.

But Mr. Harraby Vasey scanned a wide horizon, extending far beyond the social pleasance. At Bredbane's instance he paid marked attention to the lower orders ; and it seemed to him important for the furtherance of his ambition to show politeness to his Nonconformist friends in Nornham no less than to delightful people like the Tavans. They were of a class he could not ask his wife to visit, and yet they might expect some hospitality. In this dilemma he conceived the garden fête—a monster entertainment to take place in June, when the gardens at the Grange were at their best. A good string band was to be brought from London ; the pleasure-grounds and fir-wood were to be illuminated ; a variety performance was to be given on the tennis lawn ; refreshments of the very best would be provided, the contract to be shared among the Nornham caterers ; and everyone, without distinction, was to be admitted. It would sound a trumpet of defiance to Lord Mells and his retainers, all invited, announcing that their dark, oppressive reign approached its end.

When Jerry came at Easter there was talk of little else. Knowing nothing of the aim of this great bid for popularity, he thought his father had gone mad with Radicalism.

“ I don't know what's wrong with him,” he confided to Mr. Catchpole, speaking across a hedge one evening, when the chairman of the parish council was at work on his allotment. “ He really can't be keen on entertaining all the rascals going. It's that ass Bredbane—calls himself a Socialist !”

“ Do he indeed ? Well, that accounts for things—

the way he've looked at me, as if I were a figure, not a man, and he was going to put me in his little sum." The ex-policeman chuckled, resting on his spade. "That's their way. They've got their scheme, you see, and they'll cut ye here, and they'll cut ye there, as if you was a block of wood, till you fit into it. But your dear father ain't like that; he's right good-natured. He'd ha' done well enough, in my opinion, if he'd stuck to the parish. That's real work for progress. But he've taken up with fireworks and high jinks. I can't help smiling. He'd ha' done some good if he'd ha' kept on walking steady, but now he've took to turning these here Cather-ine wheels——"

Mr. Catchpole choked with laughter, in which Jerry joined, diverted by the spectacle of his convulsions rather than his cryptic speech.

XVII

IF Mr. Catchpole chuckled at the sight of so much consequence intent on turning somersaults to please the crowd, the Dodman and his colleagues viewed it with disgust and anger. Their place of meeting every evening was the back-room at the Chequers—a long low place, with oaken settles and a sanded floor—and here their leader spoke his mind one night in May.

“ A garden feet ! That’s what they calls it. A reg’lar fair, wi’ whirligigs and titmatorters, and moosic, and a hossmanship, and drinks no end. And nought to pay, mind that ! Now, what’s his game, I ax ye ? ” The Dodman paused and looked around him at the solemn, sunburnt faces, illumined by an oil-lamp hanging from the middle of the ceiling. “ Wa, just to square the parish ! He reckon, arter that, we’ll fare right fond on un, and make no more adew about that heth. I bain’t a-goin’ near his mucky feet. He can take and bust hisself to ’tract me ; I ’on’t go ! ”

“ That’s it ! ” exclaimed the audience, wagging serious heads, as if thereby the garden fête was doomed to failure.

“ Hew be he ? ” pursued the orator. “ A slinkin’ Cockney. Goes about a-smarmin’ and a-frimmi-catin’ ; caps my missus, ‘ misters ’ yow and me—

like one o' these here little old insurance cadgers. Don't presarve no game" — all present being poachers, this point told—" don't breed no dawgs nor hosses. Wa, there's a mort o' farmers better gentry nor what he be!"

" I can't see what yow together grumble for?" observed the landlord from the doorway, where he leaned, with hand on hip. " He fare a wery ornary kind o' gent, by what I see on him."

" A proper slink, yow mean!" observed a youth in sea-going garb, whose eyes gleamed like his teeth, white spaces in a face burnt coffee-colour.

" Well, I know o' suffen as 'll make yow change your mind, sir." The Dodman turned respectfully towards the host. " I see a thing there t'other day I never thought to see in Christian England." He paused to take a pull or two at his pipe.

" And what might that be, Mr. Ditcher?" asked the youngest person present, a boy of sixteen, newly come into the group of toppers, who had not learnt the custom of the company, which was to treat their leader's pauses as rhetorical, and let him finish at his own pace without interruption.

The Dodman rounded on him fiercely. " What might that be? Yow youngsters ha'n't got no respect for nawthun arthly. Yow'd garp and grin at saints and vargins if they come amongst us. But I seen more o' ta warld by a long sight than what yow have, and I never knew no good to come o' that, in my time!"

" Yow ha'n't yet told us what that be," put in the publican.

" Dew yow wait a minute, sir; yow just ha'

patience ! Slow and sure's my motter ; find a better if ye can !"

The Dodman nodded proudly to his colleagues. He was a character—a nut to crack ; it was his glory.

" Now, there were that there miller here to Lark-medder. Times and times, o' Sunday, have I stood and watched that feller's sails go round, and said I to myself : ' I 'ouldn't be in that chap's high-lows, not for kingdom come.' Well, what ha' come o' that, I ax ye ? He be dead and ta mill gutted. If that bain't judgment, I should like to know what be."

His hearers nodded slowly, looking straight before them.

" Well, what I see o' Sunday arternune, as I were passin' New House garden, fare wusser 'n what miller ever done."

" Ah ! now I guess I know what you're a-drivin' at," put in the landlord gravely. " That tennis-playin' of a Sunday. That's a bad job, that is. Gentry, too, as ought to set a good example."

" Stood and stared, I did, by that there little gate agen ta hulver-tree, and thought to shame 'em. But, bless ye, they ha'n't got no more shame than what a sow have. They kep' on runnin' like destruction, yellin' out ta deuce, and bashin' them there duzzy balls about—miss and her fancy man, and tew o' them Tavans from Uffel—till there they was all of a muckwash, gels and men. And our old dear and his missus lookin' on as pleased as Punch, and sarvants handin' tea as if 'twas psalm-singin'. There'll come a judgment on such dewuns, mark my wards !"

“ Ah ! ye may say so,” cried the audience, highly scandalized. They were men who never went to church if they could help it ; but they loved the music of the bells on Sunday evenings, the sound of hymn-tunes borne upon the breeze, and revelled in the Sabbath rest and calm. They believed, besides, in God and in the devil, and other powers, including ghosts and witchcraft, so knew the danger of neglecting old observances. The proven fact that Mr. Harraby Vasey was a Sabbath-breaker made it an act of merit to resist his will.

In fact, this Chequers coterie was a survival ; as such, conservative of old traditions, and sentimental in its thought of bygone days. Its members loved the old-established gentry, from whom they claimed the privileges of dependents ; poaching the squire’s preserves in moderation, and acting as his beaters when he organized a shoot. A faithful remnant out of feudal times, they looked back towards those times, and wished to dwell in them, with some dim memory of pageants and romance. The present showed a real decay in geniality. Men living could remember brighter days, when harvest-homes, and fairs, and frolics made life gay, and largess was bestowed on all occasions. Yet they looked askance on Mr. Harraby Vasey’s efforts to revive these things, because they saw that he was not disinterested. Moreover, strangers having caused the mischief, that a stranger should attempt to mend it seemed an added insult.

This was their temper when the day fixed for the garden fête arrived. The Dodman had foretold it would be rainy, but it proved of a cloudless, most

annoying brilliance, which made him shrug his shoulders with reproachful looks, as if the powers above were not attending to their business. With his dog at his heels, he slouched about the village, heaping scorn upon the preparations of the more respectable inhabitants—the girls with hair in curl-papers, the housewives brushing out their husbands' clothes.

"So yow be a-goin' to take what's give ye with a cartsey, and never think what's bein' took away. That's all a blind agen him baggin' that there heth," he called out to one busy dame.

"Consarn yer clash-ma-dang! Yow git along!" was the impatient answer. "To hear yow, anyone'd think that bit o' heth were meat and drink instead o' rubbage. That'd dew more good if yow together was to keep yersels respectable instead o' swillin' and codswobblin' i' ta pub. Warthless mucks, that's what I call ye."

A woman who had reared eight children in respectability upon the income of a husband who had never earned more than thirteen shillings a week paid scant attention to the clamour of a gang of idlers. Her view was that of many people in the village, though few would have cared to give it such loud utterance; for the Dodman and his friends were looked upon as reckless outlaws who would stop at nothing.

The rebels stood and jeered these humble servants of the gentry as the latter hied them to the garden-fête that evening; and afterwards repaired as usual to the Chequers. But the wonted satisfaction in their cups escaped them. The thought of gaieties

so near at hand destroyed their ease. At length the Dodman cried :

“ Let’s go up on ta heth, and watch from there. That’s common land.”

“ Don’t you go a-gettin’ into mischief, mind !” enjoined the landlord, as he watched them disappear into the darkness.

An oath from the Dodman, who was leading, checked their progress. He had forgotten the new gate where the footpath joined the road, and had run against it. “ Bring that along,” he said. “ We’ll chuck that down to help on the rejoicin’s.” The gate was lifted off its hinges and borne on.

From the edge of the firwood, looking down between the trunks, they saw long bead-like strings of coloured lights, and heard the heartsome music of a band. When, after a minute or two, that music ceased, there rose a murmur as of swarming bees. Beyond the little isle of light and noise the dark and silent country stretched away.

“ There’s several there,” observed the Dodman gravely. “ Sicknun, I call ut ! Ha’n’t they got no pride ? Call that a lumination ? Tell yow what, ole pardners, let’s gie ’em lumination just for oncet. Joe bo’, dew yow run acrost to mine and ax my missis for that little can o’ ile ! Now let’s us git a lot o’ nice dry bits and lay ’em close agen them right big whins—to wind’ard, mind ! He amuse hisself down there on his land, and we amuse oursels up here on our land. Baint that fair ?”

By the time the messenger returned with a small can of oil, a goodly heap of touchwood had been

raised. The Dodman anointed it with priestlike gravity.

"Twister," he said to a mere lad who stood beside him. "If yow want a job, take yow this can and sprinkle some upon them whins out yonder. Cut and run the minute there's a tidy flame."

The boy was off like lightning. He himself knelt down and took a matchbox from his pocket without haste.

"Now we're a-goin' to call ole parson Redhead—see un up and preach, ta way he fling hissself about—that's a fair treat! And everyone be bound to look at un and hear his ward.—Proud o' yowr rick-yard, be yow, Mister Farmer? That's a bad thing for ye; that'll hut yowr soul! Parson Redhead come along, and where's them ricks?—And Mister Squire, yow got a splendid mansion, make yow botty. Parson Redhead preach a bit, and that's all gone. Yow be mother-naked, master, like when yow was born. He make 'em think, I tell ye! Ta poor man's friend he be, and no mistake."

So saying, the Dodman struck a match, screening it with his hand until the flame burned steady, when he laid it to the heap of kindling.

"Now we'll git along afore the bobbies come. There's three on 'em down yonder, keepin' order."

The gang returned towards the Chequers, crouching low amid the brake.

XVIII

A LAST glow of sunset hung behind the trees to westward as Mr. Harraby Vasey, after an early dinner, walked round the grounds on a final tour of inspection. From three refreshment tents, pitched far apart, came noise of waiters wrangling and the clash of crockery. The fairy lamps were being lighted at a dozen different points. Reporters from the country papers had arrived. His daughter and young Tavan came to join him.

"What do you think, dad," exclaimed Beryl: "Eric says that we are certain to offend the more important people."

"I was only betting you won't please them all," explained her escort. "There are as many cliques in Nornham as there are old women, and they can't stand being lumped together. My people found that out from sad experience."

"You need be under no apprehension," laughed Mr. Harraby Vasey. "The greatest care has been taken to protect the sheep from the goats."

He had in fact reserved the house for the accommodation of superior guests who came to look on kindly at the people's joy.

Five minutes later he was standing with his wife beneath a canvas tunnel, erected near the gate for their convenience, welcoming the first arrivals—

working people, red of face and sheepish in their Sunday clothes. A table near the lady was heaped up with nosegays, one of which she gave to every comer. This was her own idea, and she was glad to see that it gave pleasure. Her husband had a cordial word for all; he clapped men on the shoulders, complimented blushing maidens, and pointed out the way to where the band was playing.

A carriage and pair drove up and deposited two ladies elegantly dressed, whom neither host nor hostess could remember to have seen before. Mrs. Harraby Vasey stepped to meet them with both hands extended.

"So sweet of you to come!" she cried delightedly. "We do so hope you won't find it too boring. Will you go on to the house? You will find my daughter there to do the honours. I'm tied here for the present, as you see."

Nearly the same words greeted the Cloverfield Vaseys, the party from Nornham Rectory, the doctor's wife, the lawyer's lady, the local brewer and his family, the auctioneer, the bank manager, and a number of genteel old maids.

Mr. Catchpole, arriving with his wife and Katey, was asked to set things going; and as the result of his best efforts to comply with this request a few groups moved off from the lawn before the house, where the tendency was to congregate; but a crowd remained, and was augmented by each fresh arrival.

The host and hostess had been standing for three-quarters of an hour, employed in nothing else than shaking hands, supposing from the lively strains of

the band that all went well, when Eric Tavan hurried up and said :

“ Oughtn’t somebody to make a start ? They’re herded there like sheep ! Beryl and I could start the dancing if you liked.”

“ Beryl ! Then is Beryl not indoors ?” cried Mrs. Harraby Vasey in a trance of horror.

“ We’ve been together all the while. She sent me here.”

“ Then there was no one to receive those people ! I must fly !”

Accepting Eric’s arm, she hastened to the house, to find that all the Nornham people had departed. There remained only Alice Vasey and her aunt and the two imposing ladies she had never seen before.

One of these stood up, and, smiling, said :

“ I’m sure you haven’t the least notion who we are. I’m Lady Alice Dacey, and this is my sister Harriet. My brother couldn’t come to-night, so we used his invitation, understanding that it was a semi-public function. We have known the Cloverfield Vaseys all our lives. Alice here is my god-daughter.”

Mrs. Harraby Vasey underwent a faintness. She wished the floor would open and engulf her where she stood. These were Lord Mells’s sisters ; the speaker was the wife of a Cabinet Minister ! She moaned : “ I am so vexed that there was no one to receive you. My daughter did not understand. Everything has gone wrong. I’ve mortally offended hosts of people.”

“ That must be done sooner or later, so it’s just as well to have it over, don’t you think ? Please

don't worry about us. If you'll let us walk about the gardens with your cousins we shall be quite happy."

But Mr. Harraby Vasey, bustling in just then, and learning who those ladies were, insisted on himself escorting them. He felt the honour of their presence, though it robbed the fête of all magnificence. In spite of their kind words in praise of everything, he knew they must regard it all as amateurish, being used to finer places where things are done upon a regal scale.

But after they had said good-bye, his pride recovered. He once more realized his dignity as champion of the common people. Mrs. Harraby Vasey came and told him that the Nornham gentry must have gone straight home, since they were nowhere to be found. He declared it was no matter; let them go! It was not on them he placed his hopes, but on the multitude of humbler folk who thronged the grounds. It did him good to see how these enjoyed themselves. The dancing-tent and the refreshment tents were full; numbers sat or strolled around the temporary bandstand; young couples sought the more secluded paths or wandered off into the outer fir-wood. He had been warned beforehand to expect a lot of rowdyism involving damage to his shrubs and flowers; but nothing of the sort appeared. There was some fooling here and there among the boys and girls, but it ceased on the approach of older persons. The thing was going off extremely well, he thought with satisfaction as he walked about.

At sight of Beryl and Eric Tavan examining the

crowds in search of someone, he shouted to inform them where he was.

"It's after nine o'clock," said Beryl, breathless. "Hadn't we better muster people for the entertainment?"

"Of course! I had forgotten!" He set off in one direction, Eric and Beryl in another, adjuring all they met to go at once on to the tennis-lawn. As he was speeding thus from group to group, a hand detained him, and a slow, religious voice intoned:

"I am given to understand that a music-hall performance is to take place here to-night. Is that the case, sir?"

The speaker was a Nonconformist minister.

"It is true that the performers are music-hall artists, but the entertainment promised us to-night is unexceptionable. I expressly stipulated that there should be nothing vulgar."

"I regret, sir, that I cannot countenance it. I and my wife and family are going home. We thank you kindly for your hospitality."

Mr. Harraby Vasey marvelled at such narrow-mindedness. His one wish was that people should enjoy themselves.

A good part of the tennis-lawn had been covered with planking, on which rows of chairs and forms were set facing a temporary stage. Besides the numbers which these seats accommodated, the grass banks on three sides were thick with people. A scent of roses from the garden came and went, and, when the audience hushed, the sighing of the fir-trees could be heard. The entertainers sang

songs comic and sentimental, and gave a little operetta, which was much applauded. When, half-way through the programme, they required a rest, Mr. Harraby Vasey got upon the stage to make his speech as host. He did not wish to leave this till the very last when people, in a hurry to be going, never listen. It was a speech of hearty welcome and goodwill, though coloured strongly by the evening's agitations.

"My friends," he said, "it is with lively pleasure that Mrs. Harraby Vasey and myself behold so many of you gathered round us here to-night. It is a kind of gathering unusual in the neighbourhood. Some people said beforehand that it would involve the ruin of our grounds. We were not daunted, I am glad to say ; and, as it proves, the very people who so kindly warned us are the only ones who have given us the slightest trouble. Just because we were all busy, and there was no one in the house to entertain them specially, their dignity was much offended, and they went away again." This news was greeted with loud boos and cries of "Shame." "Well, we haven't missed them, have we?" (Laughter.) "I even venture to say that we can always do without them. We English people don't like airs and graces. Now, I must tell you of another little incident which much surprised me. A gentleman—who shall be nameless—came to me and asked if it was true that there was going to be a music-hall performance here to-night——"

This reminiscence was cut short by a tremendous uproar. For a minute previous the orator had been aware of some distraction in the audience, of

faces turned away from him, and people springing to their feet. But now the whole vast crowd was in commotion. There were shouts of "Heath's afire!" "Gie us a pole!" "Come on, bo'!" "Here's a job!" Men ran, some up towards the heath, others towards the house to get long sticks of some kind; and women followed, screaming out suggestions. Mr. Harraby Vasey was left standing unregarded on the stage, aware now of a conflagration which made fairy-lamps look foolish, of shadows leaping on the grass and trees, of clouds of smoke beginning to unfurl above.

He was startled by a pleasant voice beneath him, saying:

"Vasey, we didn't really go off in a huff. We saw that you were busy, and amused ourselves to save you trouble."

Looking down, half-dazed, he saw the Rector of Nornham and his wife and family, the doctor with his wife, the lawyer's lady, the genteel old maids—all the people he had held up to contumely—gathered before the stage and gazing up at him in injured innocence.

"I didn't refer to you, of course," he murmured hastily. "Some people who must be nameless, did behave as I described." The lie was needed to preserve his countenance. Pointing to the heath, he added: "My kind neighbours in the village think we need some fireworks."

"A horrid shame!" replied the Rector warmly. "Don't be anxious. The crowd up there will put it out in no time."

Going up towards the fire a moment later, Mr.

Harraby Vasey encountered a policeman dragging along a boy half dead with fright.

“ I cotched him in the act to light some whins, sir. May I stand him in the harness-room a minute while we go on searching ?”

“ By all means,” said Mr. Harraby Vasey. “ And call at the house for food and drink before you start for Nornham.”

Up by the blaze a score of voices told him not to worry, since the speakers would not budge an inch till the last spark was out. The honest fellows knew the claims of hospitality. Thus reassured and bidden, Mr. Harraby Vasey returned to the Grange, where, in the hall, he came on two reporters representing the chief county papers standing chatting at the buffet, glass in hand. He begged them as a favour not to mention the catastrophe. From their astonished faces it was evident that this was the first they had heard of it !

XIX

“ As far as I may be permitted, I would ask the magistrates to deal leniently with the prisoner, who is evidently a mere dupe, and has no doubt been terrorized. I have long been aware of the existence of a regular gang in Larkmeadow who intimidate the quiet people of the village.”

Thus spoke Mr. Harraby Vasey in the dingy court-room at Nornham when the case of the lad who had been arrested, match in hand, upon the night of the garden fête came up before the magistrates. The bench consisted of four elderly gentlemen and one young one, who all looked sleepy, for the day was hot outside, and the buzz of flies beneath the ceiling made for somnolence.

“ Thank you,” said the chairman suavely, leaning back. “ Has anyone else a word to say ?”

Mr. Catchpole stood up at the back of the room.

“ As chairman of the Larkmedder parish council, I should like to say that the gang, as he call it, ain’t so bad as Mr. Harraby Vasey think. They’ve got a notion as that bit o’ heath is common—that isn’t right, I know—but that’s what they keep saying ; and all they’ve done so silly-like was wishing to assert their rights. There’s another question of a right-o’-way——”

“ I’m sorry to interrupt,” observed the clerk to

the justices, "but neither of those points arises from the case before us."

Mr. Catchpole, with a crimson face, sat down, and instantly began to mop his forehead.

After a languid discussion by the bench, the case was judged. A fine of thirty shillings was imposed. Certain of the public then got up and left the room, among the number Mr. Harraby Vasey and Mr. Catchpole. The former frowned upon the latter when they met outside the door, and returned his cordial greeting very frigidly.

"My, ain't it hot to-day?" observed the expoliceman, looking down the sun-baked street, where all the shops had awnings out and tradesmen in their shirt-sleeves stood and gasped in doorways. On every side trees showed above the housetops, all their leaves dead still; and voices of the farmyard rose and fell unceasingly, for, apart from its one long, winding street of shops, the town of Nornham was as agricultural as any village.

Mr. Harraby Vasey deigned no answer. He was moving off towards the George Hotel, where he had left his dog-cart, when Mr. Catchpole cried:

"Don't go like that, sir! I can see you're vexed with me for speaking up. I felt that was my duty as the chairman of the council."

"Your sense of duty is delightful," came the tart rejoinder. "As my guest the other night you might have felt some indignation, since the fire was lighted with intent to spoil my fête. But for your sense of duty the culprit would have stood his trial at assizes."

"Don't you think it, sir! The magistrates are

gentlemen, and know the country. They wouldn't break a boy like that for nothing."

"Nothing, Catchpole! Are you quite yourself this morning?"

"Oh, if you're going to lose your temper, sir, I'm off. Them others 'll be down on me for saying as that piece of land ain't common. Well, come to that, I'm used to treading my own beat."

Mr. Catchpole raised his hat and strode off chuckling. All down the quaint old street the tradesmen at their shop doors said "Good-day" to him, and made the same remark about the weather. At the corner by the post-office he was stopped by an acquaintance, and forced to listen to a long account of gouty troubles. Then, further on, among the outskirts of the town, a farmer in a gig pulled up and made complaints about a certain footbridge in the bounds of Larkmeadow. It was not until he got on to the hill above the cemetery, and with an open road before him paused to mop his brow, that he had a fair chance to review his morning's work.

He had gone to the courtroom with design to speak a word of peace, instead of which he had made further discord. No one else would have offended more than one party; he, with the best intentions, had offended both.

"Well, sarve me right for taking myself serious," he laughed. "Katey done well to tell me, 'You're a-swelling, father!'" (It was their formula of warning against self-conceit.) "I shall get as bad as he is if I don't look out."

The lad who had been tried that morning passed

him in a light cart driven by a man named Knights, a member of the Dodman's gang. They looked at him askance and laughed unpleasantly.

"What did I tell ye?" Mr. Catchpole asked his soul. "They're huffed the same as he is. Well, the more the merrier!"

With a shake of his great shoulders he stepped out more firmly, brushing the roadside mallows grey with dust. A group of ten men waited for him a few yards from home.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said facetiously. "Was any of you wishing to see me?"

Not one of them had pluck enough to meet his gaze.

"What did yow want to go for to say as that worn't common land for? That's what we ax ye! That's what we want to know!" the Dodman snarled.

"Cause that's the trewth."

"That ollus ha' bin common, and that ollus will be; don't we'll know the reason why. A dutty slink, yow be, to go and crawl to Lord Muck-in-a-push-cart."

"Come, Dodman! Don't you start a-calling names," laughed Mr. Catchpole; "do I could find one as'd hit you off a treat! A beauty you are to stand there and talk. I done what I thought right, and riled the gentleman, and now there's you together turn and mob me. I don't care two straws for none o' ye, so now ye know! The gentleman was standing treat to everybody, very handsome; and you, as have got a grudge agen him, spoilt the fun. A hoggish trick, I call it. Dirty spite!"

"Consarn yowr mucky flesh!" "Consim yowr

innards !” The storm of insult upon this pronouncement was received with hearty chuckles.

“ You’ll need to wash your mouths,” was all he said, while waiting with composure for their further arguments.

The mass of his assailants soon drew off, having to get their dinners and return to work. The Dodman, champion of the poor man’s right to leisure, alone remained to keep up the dispute. His truculency then forsook him, and he took a plaintive tone.

“ I know as yow mean well, sir, but I ax ye, be that fair ? This here stranger come along and try to close our little bit o’ common. And hew can stop un if that baint ta parish council ?”

“ Well, you bring evidence.”

“ Evidence be dommed !”

Mr. Catchpole laughed and went indoors. His daughter met him, crying :

“ Father, I’ve just had a card from Jerry. He’s coming home next week for three whole months !”

“ Well, there,” he chuckled, hanging up his hat. “ It’s a good job someone I know ain’t a-listening—do he’d fairly bust. Jerry ! So disrespectful ! Mister Gerald, if you please.”

“ That’s what I keep telling of her,” screamed out Mrs. Catchpole, who was getting dinner. “ But I might as well talk sense to this old dresser. How did you get on ?”

“ I put my foot in it again—offended everybody.” He sat down in a chair beside the window.

“ What did I tell ye ?—always interferin’ ! I hear them fellers at the pub subscribed a matter o’

five pound and give young Varley, Twister as they call him, what was tried this morning."

Mr. Catchpole turned his head away, and looked out of the window at the cottages across the road, each with its flowering garden clasped close to it like a posy, whose fragrance it inhaled through door and window.

Larkmeadow was his native village, and he loved it. To see things going wrong there caused him real distress. And things were very wrong indeed at present. His hopes of Mr. Harraby Vasey were all dead. At first, beholding in the magnate simply a benign old party, he had thought to play Sam Weller to his Pickwick, and to lead him by the nose in all devotion. But Mr. Harraby Vasey had proved quite intractable, showing desire to play the autocrat in ways displeasing to a parish full of local pride, where strangers were expected to kow-tow a little. The temper of the Dodman's crew was getting nasty.

"I'm right glad Jerry's coming home," he sighed at length.

"What! Have you been thinking of him all this while?" cried Katey. "Why, father, you're as bad as I am. You can't talk."

"We shall have some more good laughs, I reckon, with his college tales," remarked her mother.

"You won't have him all to yourselves this time," said Mr. Catchpole. "I'm going to harness Master Jerry to my little cart."

The son had qualities the father lacked, and was already popular. If only he would give himself a little trouble this vacation, it might be in his power to make things better, Mr. Catchpole thought.

XX

ON the day following that of his return to Lark-meadow, Jerry went to tea with the Catchpoles. Nowhere did he feel so much at home as in that cottage living-room, with three people whom he liked, and who liked him, without reserve. His fund of jokes and stories had increased since last he saw them. Mrs. Catchpole laughed at all he said; Katey indulged in giggling fits, the sight of which set Jerry off, so that, as Mr. Catchpole put it in a lucid interval, "anyone'd think the house was full o' laughing gas." For tea there were home-made rusks and sausage-rolls and shortbread—things he liked, prepared on purpose for him. The hostess even set apart his special chair.

"Well, come you out and smoke a pipe, young man," said Mr. Catchpole, when the meal was over. The ex-policeman took his hat, and led the way to the back yard, where he was used to smoke in contemplation of his flowers and vegetables. After a longish silence, when his pipe was fairly going, he emitted :

"Things are bad down here. Your father took the people wrong to start with."

"About the heath, you mean? I thought that was all settled since they caught that chap."

His friend paid no heed to the interruption,

wrestling with abstract thoughts which shun expression.

"He reckoned as they'd like him to be kind to 'em, and give 'em things when they had need. They'd ha' took that natural from anybody old-established, but they was here before him—don't ye see?—and they expect a stranger to go gently just at first. Now, the mischief is, there's some of 'em have got it he's a downright enemy; and he have got it they ought all to be in gaol. Well, now, I've been thinking. What we want's a little fellowship. Suppose you was to start a cricket club."

"But I'm no earthly good!" protested Jerry.

"The chaps won't mind your playing worse than they do. All I want's for you to take the lead, and help me with a little of your pocket-money. I've failed before through having nobody to back me up. I votes we rake in all sorts, and try and get the whole place interested. That'll do no end o' good."

"I should say and do the wrong thing, I'm afraid."

"Oh, go on, Mr. Jerry! You'd get on with anyone," said Katey, who just then came out and joined them. "I'm sure, if you can't do it, no one can."

"That's right; I knew you would," said Mr. Catchpole. "We may as well start now and call on people."

The canvass was successful beyond expectation. Everyone whom they approached seemed taken with the scheme. A meeting called by Jerry on the following evening was crowded and enthusiastic. A field behind the church was hired, a pitch prepared, and all the outfit for the game procured in Nornha .

Jerry, declining to be captain, took the post of secretary. He asked his cousin Charles to bring a team from Cloverfield, and challenged all the village clubs that he could hear of.

"Can I help in any way?" his father asked, inclined to foster this new taste for management.

"No, thanks. We want to do it all ourselves," was the reply. His father laughed, and praised his independence; his mother called him her own darling boy; Beryl and Alfred marvelled at his altruistic zeal; and Eric Tavan undertook to coach his team for him. The general approbation overwhelmed him for reasons known to no one but himself.

His career at Cambridge so far had been the common one of sensitive and nervous souls obsequious to the notions which prevail around them. Going up with a desire for excellence in manly sports, he had subscribed to all the clubs his college boasted, and flung himself into a set with which he had no sympathy. Learning his mistake in time, and loath to play the part of a mere toady, he had gravitated towards the dressy, rakish type of man, and soon been drawn into a group of wealthy idlers who saw in everything the subject for a bet. The fact that most of them were third-year men made friendship flattery, and the succession of orgies which they called existence, as well as their precocious knowledge of the world, gave him a sense of living dear to youth. But there had been moments when his spirit yearned for Larkmeadow, and he had come home in a tender, contrite mood to find refreshment in a sober life. At home he managed to forget his

dissipations for the most part. It was only when they sang his praises that he felt a beast.

At the end of August his parents and Beryl went to Cromer for three weeks, and he was left entirely to his own devices. It was summer weather. He bathed each morning in the tidal river below Cloverfield, rode home to lunch, and read till it was time to put on flannels. Mr. Catchpole generally came to tea, and walked up with him to the cricket-field, where Eric Tavan often joined them, going back to dinner at the Grange. Only one thing disturbed his high serenity. From the window where he sat and read he sometimes saw men treading the disputed path, and, knowing that they did it only from defiance, felt annoyed. To attempt to stop them single-handed would have been absurd. His mind was forced to think on strategy, and presently a comic plan occurred to him.

One Sunday afternoon he took his stand upon the heath, just where the path dipped down into the firwood, and waited till he saw two men approaching. They were members of the cricket club. He stepped to meet them.

"So glad to see you!" he cried out. "You must come round the garden, and have tea with me. I'm all alone just now, and glad of company."

The youths were absolutely tongue-tied, so he led them captive, taking all for granted. He showed them round the gardens and glass-houses, gave them each a button-hole, and then insisted on their going in to tea. The drawing-room, the splendid butler, finished them. It was more dead than alive, with crimson faces, that the poor fellows stumbled out at

last. Jerry reconducted them as far as to the heath, where, by good luck, he met a worthier foe, the Dodman, and played exactly the same game with him, only instead of tea the Dodman had a glass of ale presented to him on a silver tray.

"I was only out for a sarnter, like," the oaf objected. "The air fare wholesome up o' that there heth!"

"Quite right!" said Jerry heartily. "You're welcome to walk in the firwood and the gardens, too, while I'm alone here. Glad to see you!"

"Go yow along, Mas' Jerry; yow're tew much for me!" The Dodman mopped his brow as he took leave. It was a mode of warfare which assailed his sense of fun; "that beat him wholly," as he phrased it. The heath path was deserted after that!

"Well, that's the masterpiece; you've fairly done 'em!" said Mr. Catchpole on the cricket field next evening. "Why did I never think o' that before? You've done the master lot of good these holidays!"

The cricket season drew towards its close. The Larkmeadow club had played with varying fortunes. Its last match was against a second eleven of the town of Nornham, and the village won. There was a large attendance of spectators, who showed wild enthusiasm. Jerry afterwards presided at a supper and a smoking-concert in the school. He tried to make a speech, but failed, and ended with: "I've quite forgotten what I meant to say, but you can guess. Good luck and thanks awfully, and all that sort of thing." His failure won the meed of great success. The rafters rang. It seemed as if the cheers would never cease, till someone started "For

he's a jolly good fellow !" when the whole assembly bellowed out the friendly chorus.

There were tears in Mr. Harraby Vasey's eyes as he looked on. When his son, still blushing from the ordeal, came to him, he laid both hands upon his shoulders, and remarked emotionally :

" My boy, you have the gift of popularity. For some young men in your position I should be afraid, but you are a good steady lad, and have a head on your shoulders."

Jerry hung that head, and felt the last of men, remembering the slough of debt and dissipation to which he was returning in a few days' time.

XXI

" I SUPPOSE things'll slip back again, as bad as ever, now he's gone," said Mr. Catchpole, the words being part of a lament on Jerry's departure, dropped and resumed a hundred times one sad October day. A strong wind dashed the rain against the window ; the road outside was running water, the light brown, and the houses seemed to cower and shrink beneath their roofs for shelter. Mr. Catchpole sat by the fire with his wife and daughter, occasionally glancing over his shoulder as if to verify the badness of the weather.

" I miss him, that's the fact. He've got a trick of doing things the very opposite of his papa. That poor old dear ! What did he want to take and turn them children off the heath for—only blackberrying ! —and threaten 'em with the police and prison, and the Lord knows what all ? Jerry'd ha' took the lot indoors, and give 'em tea. It's all in this : he ha'n't no feeling for the place. Now Jerry have."

At this point he was interrupted by a knock.

" Why, whoever can that be, a day like this ?" his wife exclaimed.

Mr. Catchpole looked out of the window, but was none the wiser, the caller keeping close beneath the tiny porch. He went then to the door.

" What ! Mr. Rush ! Come in !"

"No, I 'on't! My waterproof's a-runnin' wet. I've just got home from Nornham, and I thought before I changed I'd come and tell ye. You'll never guess! The Liberals ha' chose our Mr. Harraby Vasey for candidate next election. That's one for Larkmedder. I guess I'll ha' to vote for un, as a neighbour, though I be Consarvative. I knew yow'd fare right stammed. That took my breath away."

"Thank ye, Mr. Rush, for coming round in all this wet to tell us. That's worth knowing."

"Ain't it?"

The bearer of the news retired with splashing steps; the gate slammed. Mr. Catchpole closed the door, and went back to his seat beside the fire.

"Well, that is a bit o' news!" his wife observed. "That cheer one up. I like to know the world's agoin' on a day like this."

"Jerry won't like it. He's Conservative," said Kate.

"Katey, do fetch and light the lamp; that's getting dusk," enjoined her mother.

Mr. Catchpole sat and nursed his thoughts in silence, staring at the fire, with hands clasped round one knee. As a Liberal he had grown excited at elections, had cheered and hooted with the rest; it was the game. But he had never thought the players worthy of respect in private life any more than any other class of show performers. That a gentleman whom, in a measure, he revered and liked, an elderly man, should join their ranks, seemed pitiful.

"I'm a-going on the Halls myself to-morrow," he

announced, and then, after an interval : " The poor old dear ! One can't help laughing. I suppose he reckon if he contest the division three or four times at his own expense they'll make him ' Sir ' or something. And all as pleased as if it was the road to Heaven ! Larkmedder ain't worth a thought—a little village ; we want to manage the whole mortal earth. I marn go out and hear what folks are saying."

" Never, in all this rain !" his wife protested. His only answer was a laugh as he assumed his overcoat.

Of all he visited, the Atheist alone appeared delighted by the news. A few, like Rush, professed to see in it some vague, half-mystic honour to the place, but the great majority received it as a screaming joke. That the old gentleman could still fancy himself a popular character after all that had passed was quite the masterpiece in their opinion.

" Now we know the meanin' o' them gifts at Christmas, and ta schooltreat, and that garden feet and all. Artful, ain't he ? Crafty ? But there's others weren't born yesterday," observed the blacksmith, with a knowing grin.

But it was at the Chequers that he found the greatest indignation. There were only three men in the taproom when he entered, but they swore for fifty.

" Represent ta county—him !" The Dodman spat expressively. " Don't represent not nobody ! Don't belong here ! A stranger, that's all he be—muck at that ! Represent us, indade, ta old garpin' hyayna ! . . . Dew yow know, Mr. Catchpull, what

he been and gone and done? He been and gone and mended that there fence. That's luck for him as all our chaps be gone a-fishin'."

"Mended that again, have he?" Mr. Catchpole frowned and bit his lip, all thought of Mr. Harraby Vasey's candidature completely ousted from his mind by grave reflections. "When were that mended, d'ye happen to know?"

"I notice that to-day as I come by."

"Well, I must have a little talk wi' him to-morrer."

Mr. Catchpole went home feeling much annoyed. By repairing the fence again, without consulting him, Mr. Harraby Vasey stood committed to the old procedure which they had already tried repeatedly with bad results. It was not in him to despair, however. He still hoped to persuade the landowner to take decisive action, and to that end sallied forth next morning in the driving rain.

At the Grange he was informed that the governor had gone to Ipswich. He was turning from the door which Grain held open, smiling, when Mrs. Harraby Vasey crossed the hall, and saw him. At once Grain's face assumed forbidding gravity.

"Mr. Catchpole! Did you wish to see my husband? Do come in! All sorts of people have been here congratulating. They say he's just the man! And so he is, I think; don't you? But, of course, you do, for you're a Liberal, I recollect."

Mrs. Harraby Vasey had looked up to Mr. Catchpole from the moment she first heard that he had been a City constable. The experience of a lady shy at crossings had begotten admiration of the

force ; she was, moreover, oddly blind to class distinctions—a failing, far from unbecoming in a woman of assured position, upon which her husband and her children rallied her.

“ You do think he’s the right man, don’t you ?” she pursued, when she had compelled him to sit down before the fire in the hall. “ I don’t know much about it—all my people are Conservative—but it makes the house quite lively.” Herself the sedentary genius of the house, she loved the feeling of excitement round her. “ I’m all alone this morning. Beryl has gone to Ipswich with her father.”

“ I came up here to-day about that fence. I see he’s mended that again,” said Mr. Catchpole, ashamed to let the purpose of his visit be misconstrued.

“ But that’s all settled, is it not ? The people are convinced. I understood him to say that you had told him so.”

“ Well, there ! He can’t ha’ listened, ma’am. All I said was they’d had enough at present, and, was he to allow a right-of-way, they’d be content, I thought.”

“ Then you anticipate more trouble ?” she asked eagerly. The dispute about the heath was like political events, outside the house and garden ; a subject, animating conversation, which amused the men-folk. She liked to hear of it, even as she liked to read of warfare in the newspaper, strong in the faith that it could not come nigh her.

“ I do, ma’am, that’s a fact, unless he take some action.” But just then her attention wandered,

diverted by the noise of wheels upon the drive. "Who can it be?" she cried. The door-bell rang. The butler crossed the hall.

"Grain, if it's anyone political, I'm not at home."

Gravely bowing, Grain proceeded to the door. He returned, discreetly smiling, saying:

"Mr. Bredbane!"

"Alfred!" She started up with joy. "Oh, don't go, Mr. Catchpole! You know Mr. Bredbane! Stay and amuse him while I give some orders."

"I've come down for a spell of rest from divers labours, and also to see how our new candidate is getting on. You know I take a personal pride in him, for I first suggested his standing, and I've been pulling wires for him at headquarters." Bredbane ran and held the door for Mrs. Harraby Vasey to pass out, and then, returning towards the fire, said pleasantly:

"Well, Mr. Catchpole, what think you of the great news?"

"I'm sorry the gentleman can't content himself with Larkmedder. There's a lot want doing here."

"Pshaw!" laughed Bredbane. "That's work anyone can do."

"But no one take and do it, that's the mischief, sir. And, to tell you the truth, I ha'n't no great opinion of M.P.'s."

"Well, they're our representatives! You mustn't run them down."

"I wouldn't if they represented us what I call properly. But they don't. They put themselves up; we don't choose 'em. They talk of payment of

members. Who's going to pay a man for doing what he likes?"

"Well, how would you improve things?" questioned Bredbane, much amused. "I suppose you think that you could make things perfect."

"Not perfect, sir," the ex-policeman chuckled. "But anyone could make them sensibler than what they now are. Just you put a stop to canvassing and fetching voters to the poll in carriages—both of 'em things as never ought to be—you'd see a difference. And then, instead of people putting themselves up, we'd have a list of all those qualified by residence and local service stuck up in public places like the list o' jurors, so as we could elect a man without his wishing it. Then I'd pay him."

"A bright idea, but quite impracticable," sniggered Bredbane.

"You're like me, Mr. Catchpole," said Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who just then rejoined them. "I can never see why things can't be put right."

XXII

IF there was a sort of man Bredbane had all his life detested, it was the class he found personified in Eric Tavan. Although in fact an offshoot of the people, Eric had all the aristocratic limitations, thanks to the accident of wealth and education, above all (Bredbane would have added) lack of brains. Where Bredbane could descry a hundred courses open, Tavan saw but two: the right and wrong; and however much the former might deride that narrow outlook, he had to grant it the advantage of decision and a certain grandeur, like fine style—a something which he lacked and longed to have. The stupid, well-made youth, though demonstrably inferior, was somehow, by some fluke, the finer character. It is the grudge of the upstart intellect against good breeding the world over.

Bredbane accepted Eric's worship with the arrogance of one who had enslaved an ancient foe. It gave him joy to patronize the gilded youth, to watch him follow Beryl like a dog, and meet his glance of guileless envy and respect. The idea of rivalry never entered his head; to admit it would have meant contempt of Beryl's judgment. A girl who could enjoy his (Bredbane's) published works, who had sat at his prophetic feet so many months, could never love the "loyal, manly" type of

Englishman, he felt assured. When at Christmas, Ethel, mischievous as usual, teased him about his *ménage à trois*, as she called it, he only laughed and pointed out the uses of a *tertium quid* with a motor-car, who was content with the position of a servant geni. And if at last he made a mild remonstrance, it was only to satisfy Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who began to be distressed at Eric's lovelorn state, and dared not speak to Beryl on her own account.

"I wouldn't let that boy come here so much if I were you," he hazarded one morning when alone with his betrothed, speaking in dispassionate, half-jesting tones. "He makes himself and us ridiculous, and it's bad for him. From mere humanity we ought to stop him making such an exhibition of himself."

"What's wrong?" said Beryl in surprise. "I've noticed nothing. He's not a boy, you know; he's the same age as I am. I've always found him sensible and very nice."

"He's getting into such a mawkish state——"

"I hadn't noticed it. But if his coming worries you at all I'll tell him to keep away. It will mean that I shall have to pick a quarrel, but I dare say I can manage that," she laughed.

"No, no, for mercy's sake!" said Alfred hastily, finding the tables turned against himself.

"And while we are on the subject," she continued sweetly, "I wish you wouldn't make such open fun of him. It doesn't look well, when he's so good-natured. He's always telling me how much he likes you."

“ He really does amuse me, but I’ll try to hide it,” said Alfred, gulping down his own amazement. What was coming to the girl? Six months ago she could no more have talked like that, to his defeat, than danced a hornpipe. In some respects she had improved, being less umbrageous, less stilted, and more natural than when first he knew her. It struck him, too, that she was prettier and better dressed. He did not grumble at the change ; he only marvelled.

The fact was simply that her health was better, thanks to the country life she had at first detested. To fly across the land in Eric’s car was an excitement which she now preferred to any book ; and Miss Trotter of Cloverfield Rectory, always organizing and recruiting, had drawn her into hockey, badminton, and other games. Insensibly she had grown critical of Alfred ; perceived that he was self-indulgent and inclined to fatness, and suspected him of some degree of insincerity. Still she accepted him for what he was. She had never once compared him in her mind with Eric till the morning of the conversation just related, when his confidence in his superiority annoyed her.

Half an hour after her repulse of his benevolent advice she saw him curled up on a sofa in the drawing-room, intent upon a local weekly paper called the *Nornham Guardian*, seeking gems of style. It was his pastime every week he came to Larkmeadow. Exploding suddenly, he read aloud :

“ ‘ Rev. Jones and other leading pietists spoke at the graveside, and the floral tributes were numerous and gratifying.’ Oho ! this is too rich !

‘Leading pietists!’ Ha, ha, ha! Did you hear that, sir? And ‘floral tributes—gratifying!’ This is worth preserving!”

“Extraordinary!” gasped Mr. Harraby Vasey. “I must have that in my scrapbook. Will you read it once again? It’s unbelievable. My dear!” he called after his wife, who had just passed into the smaller drawing-room, “do listen to what Alfred has discovered in the Nornham paper. Ha, ha, ha! It’s almost too good to be true! Beryl, you heard it?”

Beryl smiled agreeably; but she was watching Alfred, whose position on the sofa, in the pangs of mirth, showed all the defects of a figure which had lost the pliancy of youth. He looked grotesque. Could any cleverness atone for all the graces which he lacked? she asked herself; and from that moment she was conscious of preferring Eric.

Eric’s clear face; his honesty; his boyish slang; his readiness to be of service; above all, his trust in her superior wisdom, now enchained her. When Alfred called him stupid, she felt angry—angry with Alfred for his self-conceit, vexed with herself for entertaining wanton thoughts. If he was stupid, then she hated intellect. No clever man had ever touched her heart as he did, making her wish to laugh and cry, to pet and scold, and tease and mother all at once. There was an end of the old laughing friendship. The knowledge of her own depravity begot embarrassment. Her manner to him was now chilling, now compassionate, as love or duty came in the ascendant; but, strange to say, love borrowed duty’s tones, and duty love’s. When most deter-

mined to keep troth with Bredbane she was kind to Eric, and when her weakness nearly overcame her the reverse.

"I say, what's up, you know?" he blurted out one day, with downcast eyes. "If I'm a nuisance, don't mind saying so, and I'll sheer off. I know I'm not up to your standard—yours and his—but I hoped I didn't bore you. It's a treat for me to look at you and listen——" His voice quavered.

"I don't know what you're saying," Beryl snapped him up. "Of course we're always pleased to see you. You've been very kind. I only wish you weren't so silly sometimes. Oh, don't look like that! I simply can't endure you in pathetic mood!"

"Sorry," groaned Eric. "I'd do anything 'on earth——"

"Oh, say no more, please, I've had quite enough."

Beryl could tell no one of her state of mind, her previous fight for Alfred making the avowal of a change of feeling too humiliating. After having forced him on her family, to dismiss him now would be to court contempt. Her nature was perverse and fickle, she perceived; she strove to conquer or at least chastise it. But Alfred took her conscientious efforts for endearments; his conceit was hateful; and it did not ease her lot to realize that she could still have liked him as a friend. She had pledged her life to him, that was the bitter thought; and any day he might obtain the post of settled income which her father made the sole condition of

their marriage. The prospect was despair, yet she saw no escape. At times she felt indignant with her father, the head of the household and her natural protector, for not perceiving for himself what she endured, and coming to her rescue with authority.

But Mr. Harraby Vasey had his own concerns.

XXIII

It was Mr. Harraby Vasey's habit to suppose that all went well with others when he happened to be busy. Only in days of leisure did he watch over his family. The cares of statesmanship at present weighed upon his brow, while round his mouth appeared complacent wrinkles of democracy.

The chief Liberal agent for the constituency, a man of dubious gentility, fluent, hard-voiced, positive, holding all things lawful which were not illegal, took formal charge of him, declaring : " We'll get you in, sir, with hard work, if you do all I tell you." Such words and such a manner were unpalatable, but Mr. Harraby Vasey schooled himself to their endurance. The division might be won with careful nursing, he was told, and there was likely to be time enough for that. Liberal Imperialism was the line to take just now ; home affairs, the land, and so on, were the things to go for, until the wave of Jingo fever had passed, when they could get in little whacks about the conduct of the war.

" And, sir," remarked the agent in conclusion, " you'll have to drop your second name and be plain Vasey."

Mr. Harraby Vasey was obliged to bow to each suggestion, and the agent, shaking hands, said he would do.

But in his first important speech he made a blunder. Treating of the injustice of the present system of land ownership, he made too marked a reference to the Earl of Mells. This drew on him a correspondence in the county papers. His cousin Robert wrote a business-like and plain denial of what he called "the charges brought against his lordship," citing facts—as that the Earl paid heavy poor rates, yet pensioned everyone on his estate; that his farms were more desired than any freeholds, even by men who were themselves small owners; that he had given land to parish councils for various purposes, and that he upheld a standard of cattle-breeding and good farming generally which no association of small holders could have set.

"You'll have to answer this, sir," said the Liberal agent, as he showed the newspaper to Mr. Harraby Vasey one December morning, having driven fifteen miles for that sole purpose. There was snow upon his shoulders. "I should brave it out. What's your opinion, Mr. Bredbane?"

He turned to Bredbane, who was present, with more of deference than was apparent in his manner to the candidate, for he beheld in the London journalist a man accustomed, like himself, to pull the strings and watch the puppets work.

"He can defend his utterance on general grounds while denying any personal intention," was the answer.

That very afternoon, with Bredbane's help, Mr. Harraby Vasey wrote a letter, his retreat with honour. A few days later, happening to be in Nornham on a market day, he met his cousin Robert,

who said heartily : " Give us your hand ! I like a man who can confess he's in the wrong " ; from which it seemed that the letter had been misinterpreted.

" You shouldn't speak without your book, though, not in public. And I'm going to risk another bit of my advice," continued Robert Vasey. " Just you settle that affair about the heath at once, and openly. If you don't, you'll find that'll be used against you."

" It's settled now, I think," said Mr. Harraby Vasey with repressive coldness.

He felt at times uneasy, less on account of Robert's warning and others to the same effect which he received, than because of a change he saw or fancied in the bearing of his own adherents. Men who had been reverence itself before his candidature was announced now met him with a knowing smile, and all but winked. The reason of his benefactions to the neighbourhood, his universal affability, was known. He had entered on a path which no one yet trod with unselfish motives. Opponents sneered and staunch supporters grinned. His acquaintances in Nornham—parsons, doctors, lawyers, Tories all—laughed heartily, and told him he had not a chance. They spoke with such assurance as to fill him with suspicion of some conspiracy on foot to put him down ; doubtless by way of vengeance for his so-called insult to Lord Mells, the Tory Juggernaut.

Then something happened by means of which he won applause apart from politics. Early in February it became known that the Vicar of Lark-

meadow was ill. A stranger taking Sunday duty made the fact discussed. On Monday morning Mr. Catchpole called on Mr. Harraby Vasey with the news that the old clergyman was very sadly. The chairman of the parish council showed distress. He had met the doctor on the road and heard his verdict.³

"He 'used a nasty word—'starvation,' sir. I hadn't a notion, nor had nobody. We knew the old chap was hard up and that, but starving—no! That's dreadful, to my thinking. Here, in our parish like next door to us."

"Dreadful indeed!" gasped Mr. Harraby Vasey.

"I thought if you'd come up and see what we could do? The doctor's round there now."

Mr. Harraby Vasey called for hat and overcoat. A minute later he was on the road. The shocking news had spread like wildfire through the village. Bare-armed women stood discussing it at cottage gates, and at the turn into the Vicarage drive they came on a strange group—the landlord of the Chequers with a basketful of loaves of bread, a mighty cheese beneath his other arm, and Mr. Ditcher with a frail full of potatoes, barring the way for Mr. Pretious, who held the handles of a wheelbarrow piled up with cabbages.

"This ain't no job o' yourn," the Dodman was observing sternly. "Baint yow ashamed to come here on this holy ground? This here's a job for Christun men, I tell ye, Atheist. Wheel them greens back home; they'll bring a judgment."

"Dew let me by, Mr. Ditcher. I fare just the same as yow together 'bout ta pore ole dear!"

“Go on, don’t heed them, Atheist,” said Mr. Catchpole, coming up just then, at which the warding angels fell back, grumbling, and Mr. Pretious, tipping up his barrow, trundled it along at Mr. Harraby Vasey’s side.

The doctor, when approached, rejected a kind offer to remove the patient to the Grange for proper tendance. An old inhabitant, he resented the newcomer’s wish to dominate. “He will be moved this afternoon to our small hospital—the best place for him,” was his cool reply.

Mr. Harraby Vasey then inquired if there was nothing he could do, and hearing “Nothing,” left the house dejectedly, overtaking on the drive Mr. Catchpole, Mr. Pretious, Mr. Ditcher, and the publican, all of them downcast and made brethren by a like repulse. His emotion was, however, too profound to brook inaction. On his return he wrote a letter to the *Nornham Guardian* presenting this sad case of a Church of England clergyman, with envy of “the better organization of our Nonconformist brethren, by which their pastors are secured from destitution,” and proposing a local subscription on behalf of the sufferer. He wrote also to the rural dean and to the Bishop, offering out of his own purse to raise the living to two hundred pounds a year.

His lead was universally approved and followed. Many of the clergy wrote to thank him personally; the Dissenters sang his praises as an active Christian, and the Liberal agent drove over on purpose to inform him:

“That’s the ticket! You couldn’t anyhow have

struck a softer lay," a point of view which much astonished the philanthropist.

A public meeting was held in connection with the little tragedy, with the rural dean in the chair and Mr. Harraby Vasey at his right hand, when a petition was forwarded to the Bishop to procure some bounty for the invalid and useless clergyman, as well as his removal from the cure of Larkmeadow, of which he could no longer do the duty.

In the height of this benevolent excitement Mr. Harraby Vasey found one morning on his breakfast-table a postcard with a legend thus conceived :

" DEAR SIR,

" this is to tell you as the path wich you fenced up agen be publick rite. It will be cut to-night by one as is the pore man's frend

" yrs in duty

" PASON REDHED "

It was addressed " Mr. H. Vasey, Esq., Larkmeder."

" Really!" he ejaculated; then, rising with decision, rang the bell.

" What is it, father?" questioned Beryl, who alone was present. He tossed the card across to her.

" Grain," he questioned, when the manservant appeared, " have you heard of any damage done last night?"

Grain coughed, and looked unhappy. He disliked to be the bearer of ill tidings.

" Well, sir, since you ask me—the under-gardener have been saying in the kitchen as there's some-

thing wrong. Not much, I should conclude from what he said, but something, sir, to do with the new fence."

"Thanks ; you can go."

Mr. Harraby Vasey thrust away his plate, emptied his cup of tea, and got up purposefully.

"Redhead—I don't know the name," mused Beryl as she handed back the card.

"A *nom de guerre*, my dear, like Captain Moonlight," her father answered with a little sneer. "Upon my word, things have come to a pretty pass in rural England when landowners find threatening letters on their breakfast-tables."

He then stalked out into the hall, assumed his hat, and started for the village. On the way he saw the nature of the damage done. A piece some four feet square had been cut out and sawn in four unequal pieces, which now formed a stile, a tidy bar and step, inviting wayfarers. It was a drizzling morning, and the place looked wretched. Each cottage had a humble, careworn look which made the power of the inhabitants to vex him as unthinkable as being bullied by a flock of sheep.

Mr. Catchpole received the early visitor without surprise, for tidings of the outrage had already reached him.

"I must ask you," said Mr. Harraby Vasey sternly, "as chairman of the parish council, to stop this kind of thing by taking action."

"Against them ? That can't be, sir."

"No, against me. I can't let this go on."

"Well, I don't know what we can do exactly. That'd cost money ; we should have to borrow

somewhere. You once said as you'd be willing to pay for counsel's opinion. Do you hold to that, sir?"

"Certainly. I will bear the cost of all inquiries necessary to your forming a decision one way or the other."

"Well, you can't say fairer. I must call the council, and you can propose our taking of the matter up. Then when we've found out all we can—which'll take time—we'll have a parish meeting and put that to the ballot. In the meantime, sir, I wish you'd talk to Atheist. He go on against them others something cruel, as if to cut your fence were worse than church-breaking. I reckon you're the first gentleman ever spoke to him in kindness, and that's kind o' turned his brain. He talk to rile 'em."

"He's the only sane man in the place!" cried Mr. Harraby Vasey.

XXIV

OF his Cloverfield relations Mr. Harraby Vasey had now washed his hands, as intimates, though he still felt obliged to recognize them.

"They have good points, no doubt," he told his wife, "but they are not the class of person one desires to mix with. You think that there cannot be distinctions in a family? There are, and must be, or how can one branch rise above another? But in their case the difference I mean is more of fibre than of social standing."

He was fortified in this conceit by the conversation of Miss Trotter, who, as Beryl's friend, came often to the Grange. This lady talked about the farmer Vaseys in sarcastic tones, the same she used for all her friends behind their backs. Aware that she could tell a story well in caustic vein, she sacrificed all ties to that propensity. One afternoon, in Mr. Harraby Vasey's presence, she dilated on the latest escapade of Alice.

There dwelt, not far from Cloverfield, a man named Burrige, a retired butcher. He lived alone, and spent his nights carousing, in which state he was sensitive to wild alarms. The Vasey boys had made a practice of tormenting him; had fired off guns around his house at midnight; had rigged up phantoms at his windows and made fiendish noises,

enough to drive him mad. For two years now this pastime had been discontinued, till the other day, when the boys, being all at home once more, with the exception of Roger, revived it one fine night for old time's sake. Their victim had, however, changed his habits in the interval. Armed with a good big stick, he stalked them in the orchard and surprised them. The boys escaped over the fence ; Alice was captured in the act to follow. Burrige dragged her to his house and barred the door against her brothers, who knocked and kicked, and threatened to burn down the place.

" Ah, yow can rave together !" jeered her captor (Miss Trotter reproduced his speech with realism). " That don't hut no one. Fetch yer father here, and let me see him ; don't I'll kip the maw till marnun."

In the end they were obliged to fetch their father. Farmer Robert, roused from sleep and much enraged, was brought upon the scene. Alice had on a suit of Walter's clothes, and looked a piteous object with her hair dishevelled and cheeks stained with tears ; for Burrige, when he dragged her in, had not been gentle, and while alone with her had uttered some home truths. Her father took her home without a word. Next morning she was summoned to the judgment, and got so severe a lecture that (Miss Trotter said) her spirit was quite broken. From an epic heroine she had become the soul of meekness, and endeavoured to be helpful in the house. It was too tragic.

Mr. Harraby Vasey gaped in horror at this narrative. His cousin's household was a scandal to the

neighbourhood. He thanked God that his own children had been brought up differently.

A little shock, however, was in store for his complacency in that connection, for towards the end of May, when he was busy planning out festivities to celebrate King Edward's coronation, he heard that Jerry was sent down from Cambridge.

"I regret to inform you," wrote the college dean, "that, owing to a serious breach of discipline, your son has ceased to be a member of this University. For some time past we had observed, and tried to obviate, a tendency to dissipation. Last Wednesday he was driving to Newmarket with young Lord Witchampton in most doubtful company, when an automobile, or motor-vehicle, caused the horses to take fright. There was an accident, and one of the women sustained injury. The affair found its way into the newspapers"—Mr. Harraby Vasey wondered that he had not seen it—"and the authorities have no option but to send down both the undergraduates concerned."

To say that Mr. Harraby Vasey was astonished is to put things mildly ; but he had too much occupation at the moment to be much concerned. Boys will be boys, he reflected, and Jerry's sins were of the kind which pass with youth—the simple outcome of high spirits in young men of wealth and station.

All the same, he had reproaches ready when his son arrived that afternoon, pale-faced and dull-eyed, with a headache, having spent the previous night in London with his comrade in disgrace, and was surprised by the contrition his sharp words evoked. His frown relaxing at the evidence of heartfelt

sorrow, he spoke of comfort to his son and tried to cheer him. But the young man's feelings in this homecoming were nearly those of one who, waking from a spell of madness, finds himself a criminal. He felt eternally defiled ; and the kindness of his father, mother, Beryl, everybody, made his shame more poignant.

"They're all so decent to me," he made moan to Mr. Catchpole, "when all I deserve is to be kicked off the place."

Mr. Catchpole alone received his full confession ; was aware that all four occupants of the dog-cart had been tipsy when the accident occurred, and that Witchampton, sitting in the road with bleeding face, had belched forth torrents of disgusting language, to the anger of the motorists, who had ladies with them.

"Well, you're a beauty !" was the ex-policeman's comment. "You've got call to feel ashamed of yourself ! Just look at it, and keep on looking, till that make you sick ! I never knew a man much good till he'd seen cause to hate himself. It's the ones as thinks themselves all right no one can't do with."

"I only wish they'd go for me at home," sighed Jerry. He soon had his will. Made anxious by his son's prolonged despondency, Mr. Harraby Vasey thought of letting Jerry travel for some months in order to regain his spirits, and was seeking in his mind some staid companion for him, when Jerry's Cambridge bills began to come. The scheme of foreign travel was at once abandoned, and Mr. Harraby Vasey's anger flamed on high. He had

already been put out of humour by the tidings of King Edward's illness, which upset his plans. He scarified his son with savage irony, exclaiming :

" Is that all, sir ? Can't you think of any more ? This is so little, there must surely be some more ! Three hundred a year is nothing for mere pocket-money ; you may have borrowed from the Jews—I shouldn't wonder. Come, think a little, and endeavour to remember. Take your time !"

The debts worked out at something over fifteen hundred pounds. Jerry was astonished at his father's fury, having himself lost sight of the financial in brooding on the moral aspect of his case ; but on the whole he welcomed it. His allowance ceased entirely ; while his father used him as a kind of secretary, sent him on errands, hectored him perpetually, till all the household grew indignant save the victim, who was happier thus than he had ever felt at Cambridge. Disgrace, so richly merited, revived his spirits. He found fresh pleasures in the summer landscape, saw trees and hedgerows with the eye of wonder, as might a child escaped from city slums. It gave him joy to lean upon a gate and watch a meadow ripe for hay, to which red sorrel, daisies, and small yellow flowers imparted the rich colouring of Indian shawls ; to mark the flame of poppies in green corn, the flicker of blue butterflies beneath a hedge. His soul regained its innocence in such delights.

A general parish meeting, to decide whether or no the council should take action in the matter of the heath, was called for the last Wednesday evening in July, and Jerry was kept running to and fro on errands

in connection with it. Beryl sometimes bore him company, partly to protest against his menial employment, partly because she felt extremely lonely. Eric Tavan had gone to Switzerland with his mother and sisters for two months, and she had parted from him with a coldness meant to end their friendship. This she intended as a sacrifice to Alfred ; but when the latter joked with her about the absent one, suggesting that she must be heart-broken, and asking if she wrote to Eric every day, she felt indignant and disposed to cry. Jerry, finding her a dull companion, preferred walks alone.

One afternoon—it was the day of the old Vicar's funeral—as he was coming back from Mr. Catchpole's cottage, he encountered Nelly Ditcher, to his great surprise, for, truth to tell, he had forgotten her existence. She was sauntering along the road beneath the fir-wood, near the broken fence.

“ Back again ? ” he called out cheerily.

Her delight at seeing him was unaffected, but chastened by respect and diffidence, which had no part in his remembrance of her former conduct. She blushed with downcast eyes, and called him “ Sir.”

“ I hope you're well, sir. I hardly reckoned you'd remember me. I often think of our long walks together in the dear old days.”

“ We'll go out again some evening, if you like,” he answered, laughing at her sentimental air.

“ Well, there, I should enjoy a talk about the days gone by. Wednesday evening there's the meeting. Father's going. I'll be up the lane.”

XXV

It was getting dark when Mr. Harraby Vasey set out for the meeting with his party, which consisted of Beryl and Alfred Bredbane and two old Wimbledon friends—Mr. and Mrs. Caulder—who happened to be staying at the Grange. He noticed several people on the road, and, passing by the Chequers Inn, remarked that the yard was full of carts and carriages. The murmur of a crowd was wafted from the schoolhouse yard. Judging from his past experience of the interest aroused by parish business, he had expected thirty people at the most. Finding a number greater than the total population of the village, he felt embarrassed by the presence of his visitors. As he crossed the playground with them, he heard men exclaim, "That's him!" and laugh unpleasantly. The lighted schoolroom was already packed. Something like a shout went up upon his entrance; it was followed by a moment's hush ere conversations were resumed.

In fact, thanks largely to the garden fête, the war about the heath had agitated the whole countryside; and many of the richer sort had driven, the poorer walked, long miles to see the end of it. He recognized acquaintances among the seated throng—the Rector of Nornham, Mrs. Denham, certain of his town supporters, and his cousin

Robert. The presence of the latter, a contemptuous critic and suspected foe, struck him as particularly sinister. It was all so different from his mental forecast of the scene that Mr. Harraby Vasey felt upon the brink of a catastrophe.

Mr. Catchpole, early at his post, came from behind the teachers' table to receive the party from the Grange.

"Our kind friends mean to give it us to-night, I hear," he whispered, chuckling; "but that don't matter. I'm right glad to see them take an interest in anything outside the pub. If we could have a meeting like this every week, they'd soon get tired of shouting, and grow civil. . . . You stop here by me, sir. These here chairs are for the council—set to face the music, as you see! Your friends 'll have to set among the public. There's room yonder."

Mr. Harraby Vasey waited by the table, surrounded by his colleagues on the council, while his party moved in the direction indicated. Seeing Mrs. Denham and Miss Trotter signalling, Beryl led the way to where they sat. Room being made, she introduced the Caulders, who at once began to talk effusively, while she herself sat silent, looking pensive and a little cross. Alfred had been in teasing mood all day—a mood which she hated, though he seemed to think it engaging. He was looking at her now with quizzing eye, deriding her sedateness, her glum looks.

"Still mourning for the young Adonis?" he inquired facetiously.

"Oh!" she gasped out, past patience. The wave of anger reached her very brain. "I've had enough

of you and everything. I never wish to speak to you again!"

Of course, he stared at her, prepared to laugh; but the expression of her face allowed of no constructions. With lips at whistling point, he looked away, feigning absorption in the scene around them. Incredulous, he stole a glance at her from time to time. The Rector of Nornham, seated on the bench in front of them, leaned back across the intervening desk to say to Beryl:

"I think it's splendid of your father to have called this meeting. It's so original, and yet so obviously the right thing."

Her smile was no less sweet for being quite mechanical.

Having given her time to recover, Bredbane whispered:

"You don't mean what you said just now?"

She had not meant to say the fateful words, but, having said them, would not have recanted for the world, so great was the relief decision gave her.

"I do. I can't go on like this. I've had enough. We've both changed somehow."

The level sadness of her tone enforced conviction. Once more he looked away, his brow contracting; and not another sentence passed between them.

By that time every seat was occupied; men stood three deep along the unencumbered walls, and choked the doorway. Mr. Catchpole was about to call for silence, when Mr. Pretious crossed the floor to him and whispered fiercely:

"There's a lot o' rougs from Nornham here'll try to vote. They marn't be let to dew ut; that baint fair."

The chairman nodded, saying curtly : " Thank ye, Atheist ; " on which the eager one retired, a thought discomfited.

The chairman rapped for silence, and stood up. All eyes were fixed on him ; his colleagues turning in their chairs to get a fair view of his face, and also for a respite from confronting the large audience. His nervousness was seen in heightened colour, also in the way he leaned both hands upon the table, and seemed intent upon a point between them ; but his voice was firm.

" Ladies and gentlemen, you know the reason of our meeting here to-night. That's to decide whether or no the parish council take action in the matter of that path across the Windmill Heath. Mr. Harraby Vasey wish to close that, while some folks in the parish claim that as a right of way. At the last council meeting it was proposed by Mr. Harraby Vasey " (applause and one or two derisive groans), " and seconded by Mr. Medders, that a committee should be appointed to consider ways and means, with a view to taking action, and to find out if we had a chance of winning. Mr. Harraby Vasey himself bore all expenses of inquiry, and paid the fee for counsel's opinion." (Loud applause hailed this announcement. The hero of the moment kept a rigid face intent upon the speaker.) " Well, ladies and gentlemen, we are here to-night to lay before the parish the results of that inquiry.

" The barrister's opinion is as that's an even chance, but he couldn't conscientiously advise a public body, such as us, to go to law on it, because there's no foretelling what the costs might run to,

and the path ain't worth a thousand pounds to nobody. You see, there was what's called rights of user to the mill while that was working, and when the mill stopped they was done away with. But then there's no doubt but what folks have walked across that way for years and years without a thought of going to the mill, though that was where the path by rights should lead to. Well, have they made a right by doing wrong?" (A man in the audience here guffawed, but, finding himself alone in mirth, desisted suddenly.) "That's what the lawyers might take years to argue out.

"Now, there's another thing—the money. We have made inquiries of the County Council and the Local Government Board, and it seems that we can only raise it by a rate or else by borrowing on a kind of patent system, which is rather worse, because the interest and the instalments would be a burden on the rates for years. Now, I've laid the facts before you; it's for the people of the parish to decide whether we go to law about that path or not. Any parishioner is free to speak his mind; and I'm glad to see so many strangers here to-night—that's an encouragement to Larkmedder to be public-spirited—only I shall have to ask them strangers to stand clear when it comes to voting, to avoid confusion. Now, if anyone have got anything to say, we're here to listen."

He sat down amid applause. There was a moment's silence; then someone in the standing crowd about the door exclaimed:

"That's common land!"

XXVI

“ STAND out, whoever you are,” said Mr. Catchpole, “ and speak properly, else we can’t attend to you.”

The men surrounding the invisible objector parted, and the Dodman was thrust forward, crimson-faced but dogged.

“ ‘ Ladies and gentlemen ’—that’s how to begin,” the chairman prompted.

“ Ladies and gennlemen, ta heth, as all men know, be common land. That there Vasey try to bag that, and ta council take and back un out o’ mucky scrigglin’. Nobody never said as that worn’t common, not till he took to intercedin’ wi’ what don’t consarn un, and gone and tried to disannul that pathway. He know that’s common, same as I do ; so do everyone. And that’s ta Gawspel trewth, so help me Gawd.”

The Dodman disappeared again among his sympathizers round the door, who raised a cheer.

“ Truth, is that ?” scoffed Mr. Catchpole, as soon as there was any chance of being heard. “ I thought we’d gone and done with all that nonsense. Well, ladies and gentlemen, since our kind friend there have raised the point, I may say that we have took advice about that, too ; and we’ve been warned we haven’t got no leg to stand on if we claim that heath for common. There’s a click in the village think

the council's taking sides with Mr. Vasey, because we won't rush into an expensive lawsuit without looking first to see what the result is like to be. Most of 'em aren't ratepayers, and ha'n't got no responsibility. I should like to get one or two of 'em on the council; that'd change their views. They can't expect their word to rule the parish, without no gainsayings. Now, we're here to settle about this right-of-way. I shan't vote; no more won't others on the council. We're here to lay the case before you. You decide."

Mr. Catchpole then sat down, awaiting further questions. When none came, but a rather angry murmur of discussion rose, he said to Mr. Harraby Vasey :

"Now for you, sir."

In a tremor of impersonal apprehension passing shyness, the hero of the hour stood up. He leaned one hand upon the table carelessly, to seem at ease, and fixed his gaze upon the gaudy patchwork of a map of England hanging on the farther wall. After several gasps, he said :

"Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, no one can be more anxious than I am to see this question settled legally and fairly. I therefore have much pleasure in proposing that this meeting empower and request the parish council at once to take legal action against me in the matter of the path across the Windmill Heath."

"I beg to second that," said Mr. Meadows.

Mr. Catchpole then called for a show of hands ; but "Ballot ! ballot !" was yelled out on all sides.

"Well, I must ask all them as don't belong to Larkmeadow to come to this end of the room."

Nobody moved among the standing crowd.

"There's lots from Nornham there," wailed Mr. Rush.

"A shame, that's what it is!" shrilled out the Atheist.

"Come on, you Nornham men! You've heard the chairman," said Robert Vasey, springing to his feet.

"There's the police inspector and two constables outside," said Mr. Catchpole, chuckling. "Perhaps you'd like us just to call them in."

At last there was a general movement. The Nornhamites, ashamed to cross the room, went out into the yard. All things needed for the ballot were in readiness. Two members of the council went about the room distributing small squares of paper, two to every voter. The recipient tore up the piece which he did not require. Some even chewed and spat it out for safety. Then Mr. Meadows went round with a collecting-box, which was carried to the chairman's table, where the votes were counted amid breathless silence. Presently Mr. Catchpole called the Dodman, who came forward with a heavy roll, his face like beetroot.

"Count that heap, will you? See as that's all fair. Just thirteen, ain't it?" The Dodman glumly nodded. "Well, I'll give that out."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Catchpole, rising, "the result of the ballot is as follows: In favour of the motion, thirteen; against the motion, eighty-four."

There was a sigh of satisfaction from the majority,

while the Dodman and his malcontents stared vacantly at one another, as if amazed to find themselves so few. One of them shouted :

“ That’s a shame, that’s what it is ! A put-up job ! ”

“ A shame ! A put-up job ! ” the others echoed, and they all rushed out.

“ A put-up job ! ” The shout was heard outside the building, whence soon came the sound of a considerable tumult. “ That make no difference ! That’s common land ! ”

Mr. Harraby Vasey, strong in a decisive victory and pleased to know the weakness of his enemies, gave little heed to the disturbance. Having received numberless congratulations and shaken hands with everyone who came in reach, he gathered his party together and prepared to go. But his appearance in the playground was the signal for a perfect riot.

The moon had risen and shone full upon the schoolhouse front, so that his face, emerging from the porch, was plainly seen. He and his friends were hustled and vituperated. The Dodman shouted : “ Don’t yow go a-crowin’, ye ole muck ! Yow’ll sune see. We’ll take an’ larn ye ! We’ll catch yow sich a solomander as yow ’on’t forget ! ”

Fists were shaken in the face of the astonished gentleman. Stones began to fly. A cry from Beryl told that one had struck her. Hearing Bredbane give a fiendish laugh at the same instant, Mr. Harraby Vasey thought the fright had turned his brain. He dragged the couple back into the porch, where the Caulders had already taken refuge, just as a

stentorian voice commanding "Clear away there!" announced the arrival of the police. Back in the lighted school-room, Beryl held a handkerchief to her face. Her cheek was bleeding. In reply to heartbroken inquiries, she declared that it was nothing, miserably, as if her heart's desire had been for mortal wounds. The police inspector came in, cap in hand. He had heard that a lady had been hurt, and seemed relieved to find the case no worse. He told them that the yard had now been cleared.

"I've never known 'em turn like that before, sir. That ain't a big thing, and that don't concern our Nornham chaps, who acted worst."

Mr. Harraby Vasey was amazed to hear his future son-in-law talking to Mr. Catchpole in a tone inviting quarrel. What had come upon the man?

"They call that local self-government," said the ex-policeman, "and that's run like clockwork by a Board in London."

"But, my good sir," sneered Bredbane, "you don't suppose that anyone in his senses is going to give real power to men like you. I wouldn't trust you with a penny piece of public money. What you want is more, not less, inspection. I'd have every one of you as closely guarded as a lunatic."

"That's not English, sir."

"Not English! A precious cry! It has been raised against every forward step that was ever taken. Don't talk nonsense, man! And don't, because some people let you talk to laugh at you, imagine you're a prophet in the land!"

Mr. Catchpole reddened at the rudeness, and looked much astonished. He was going to answer,

when Mr. Harraby Vasey thought it time to intervene.

“ Alfred, we’re going home,” he said incisively.

“ All right,” was the reply ; and Alfred turned his back on Mr. Catchpole with insulting readiness.

“ You will take charge of Beryl——”

But already Bredbane had attached himself to Mrs. Caulder, whom he caused to laugh by some facetious sally. His behaviour was inexplicable.

The police inspector went out with them from the school. Just as they reached the playground gate a sudden glow appeared above the heath. Their escort smote his thigh.

“ Well, that beats all ! If they aren’t setting fire to them whins. I’ll lay John Ditcher by the heels for this night’s work. I heard him threaten. Where’s my man ?” He blew his whistle, and then set off at a run.

Feeling the need of his accustomed confidant, Mr. Harraby Vasey hurried in pursuit of Alfred, leaving Mr. Caulder and Beryl to follow at their leisure. He suspected something secret underneath that night’s disturbance, to which he thought the villagers had been incited. The presence of so many Tories at the meeting, particularly that of Robert, seemed significant. It was probable that they had some foreknowledge of the riot, and had come as to a show to see the fun. His Tory friends had always laughed at him, as if they had some weapon up their sleeves ; and Robert had once specified this matter of the heath as the rock on which he would eventually come to grief. He saw a Tory plot—regarded, doubtless, by its perpetrators as the best of jokes,

to take the Cockney interloper down a peg. Never had he felt more need of counsel and support. He made haste ; but Bredbane and his companion had been walking fast. He did not overtake them till he reached the Grange, where he found his quarry in the hall talking to Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who stared at him as if she saw a ghost. He clapped him on the shoulder straightway, saying : " Come up on the heath with me, and see what's happening."

Bredbane turned a face of suave politeness.

" I am sorry to say that I must go and pack my things. Your daughter has been pleased to signify that our engagement is at an end."

" But . . . this is madness !" faltered Mr. Harraby Vasey. Beryl coming in just then, he seized her arm, and questioned her in terms so violent that Bredbane interfered on her behalf, exclaiming :

" Please don't sir ! It's a mutual agreement. We understand one another, and remain the best of friends."

He spoke with feeling. Beryl, visibly affected, broke away and fled upstairs.

" I never dreamt of such a thing !" Mr. Harraby Vasey gasped with goggling eyes, while his wife pressed Bredbane's hand in silent sympathy. " After the fuss she made to have me sanction the affair ! After all these months that we've grown used to Alfred ! It makes one look a perfect fool. It's just a passing tiff, I know ! She will repent of it ! I must go up on the heath and see what's happening. Come with me, Alfred ; the fresh air will do you good."

But Alfred, with a pleasant look, declined.

XXVII

MEANWHILE Jerry had kept tryst with Nelly Ditcher. Dinner at the Grange that evening being early on account of the meeting, a little before eight he stole out through the firwood across the heath into the lane beyond, a prey to serious doubts and hesitations. When he saw her waiting in the shadow of the hedge he thought of saying that his presence was required at home. But, once the meeting over, he was reassured. Her tone was truly thankful; she extolled his kindness, was very sentimental when alluding to their former passages, grew dreamy as she strove to picture their past innocence, and more than once exclaimed, "What babes we were!" Jerry had much ado to keep from laughing, for Nelly had not struck him as a babe at that time.

She humbly asked if she might take his arm, and, when that favour was conceded, took it reverently. It seemed he stood for her first girlish love, intense but hopeless, now remembered as the sweetest thing in life. She had seen the world since then with all its baseness, and more than hinted she had suffered at the hands of men. For politeness, he accepted the hypothesis that they had really cared for one another in old days.

"But I saw it wouldn't do"—he heaved a sigh—"so thought it best to say good-bye at once."

“ You dear boy ! ” she exclaimed with sudden ecstasy. “ You put things pretty just to save my face ! There’s a many would have gone on all the same—that’s where you’re better. Oh, I know ; I’ve seen ! That isn’t altogether my fault if I’m wild in times. That’s partly the fault of my upbringing. We was kept so strict at home. Chronic, it was, with father always jawing. You think he needn’t talk ? Well, that may be. But he’ve got his principles the same as others. That’s bad enough when he’s sober, but, when drunk, you’d think that was a parson talking, bar the swears. No wonder, when I got away, I went the pace a bit.”

Jerry grew interested in her frank avowals, as they threaded field-paths, skirting hedges which smelt sweet. He wished to make her tell him her whole story, but she, on her side, longed to hear him talk. When he mentioned his disgrace, she pressed his arm and murmured :

“ You’ve been through it too, I see ! That’s nothing for a man. They ain’t like us. And it seems as if fathers were pretty much the same, whether gentle or simple. They never seem to understand. Folks in Larkmedder have got it that your father’s more than common harsh, but I can’t see as he’s much different to mine. They’re fools to make that fuss about the heath, though you must own that do seem hard to go and close the only bit of open in the parish. We always used to play there as children, and couples like to stroll there of an evening. But to go and talk the way they do against your pa’s a shame, I call it.” She revealed to him the true mind of the village champions—a

state of indignation which, when directed at superior power, amounts to hatred. And it seemed that his disgrace, deplored by village gossips, had gone to feed the angry feeling in the place.

"They like you," Nelly told him, "and if you was in your father's shoes, it's my belief they'd let you walk on 'em. It ain't the heath exactly—it's the way he goes to work ; and yet I can't see how he could have acted different. He's got a way of looking as if he was everyone, whereas you—you're always the same !"

This phrase, obscure as rustic verdicts are, conveyed the highest compliment that could be paid a gentleman, meaning that he had not, like many of his kind, a manner for the poor.

"They needn't worry about me," he answered, with a laugh. "I deserve all I've got, and more. I feel a perfect beast sometimes."

"I reckon I do, too, dear boy," sighed Nelly. "Hymn-tunes is what do for me. There's times I've heard 'em I could take and kill myself. But you haven't got no call to talk like that. All you want is to find some nice young lady and get married comfortable."

"I've got to find the nice young lady first," he chuckled.

Nelly essayed to help him, enumerating all the gentle maidens of the district, with cunning touch upon the charms of each. She took a sentimental pleasure in this pastime, seeming really anxious to find one to suit him.

"I'd give my eyes to see you happy !" she exclaimed with fervour. "I don't know who to say,

if none of those I've mentioned suit you. You're very hard to please. Come, how about Miss Alice Vasey? She's real nice, and the same to everyone, like you are."

"I don't call her a girl at all."

"I know what you mean, but she'll outgrow all that. There's girls ripen late, and they're the sort to marry. But, there, it's no good talkin'; you must meet your fate! Only I hope you'll tell me when you find the right one; I do so often think of you and wish you happy."

The moon came up as they were turning homeward. Their shadows moved united on the ground beside them—a fact which Nell remarked with mournful pleasure. When they drew near the village, to defer their parting, she walked with him across the heath up to Mr. Harraby Vasey's fir-wood.

"I ought not to be here. Oh my, how wicked!" she laughed, as she set foot on the disputed ground. "Hark! They're coming from the meeting! Hear the row? They're wholly vexed with something."

"There's one thing: they won't come up here," said Jerry, listening to the frenzied shouts, which soon subsided.

"Well," sighed Nelly, "we must say good-bye. I'm off on Wednesday to a new situation—bar-maid at a hotel in the city of London. I do hope that we shall some day meet again. And do promise, Mr. Jerry, as you'll never quite forget me; you'll remember her you was so nice to years ago."

"Rather!" said Jerry, much embarrassed by her tone.

It was at this moment, while they stood together near the outmost fir-trees, that a voice cried, "Tally-ho! A brace o' lovers!" and heads were seen to move above the brake. "Hew be they? We'll sune see."

"Run you down into the wood," sobbed Nell in terror.

"No; I'll see you through!"

"You mustn't! Duck down, do! My father's there."

But before Jerry could select a plan of action, a red light shone on both their faces.

"Ha, ha! We ha' put up suffen pretty this time. Mum's ta ward!" came from a group of men who were themselves retreating, having set the whins on fire.

"Let me get out through your wood. I dusn't face 'em," pleaded Nelly miserably.

XXVIII

"WELL, I'm stammed!" exclaimed the Dodman, stopping in the midst of the retreat. "If that worn't Mas'r Jerry and my botty darter!" He called on the Most High to blast and rive him. "I'll wholly kill that light-conducted mawther—a-bringin' shame on all the family—on'y wait!"

"Yow'd best be cuttin', Dodman. Cops be comin', and tis yow they want! Dèw yow hear that whistle?" urged his friends. The Dodman said no more, but started trotting.

He was not so simple as to head for his own house, near which a constable was pretty sure to have been posted. Instead, he took the opposite direction, pushing through the hedge beyond the heath into a field of corn, round which he hurried till he found a way through to a field of turnips, and so on till he came at last into a lane outside the area where search was likely to be made. Then, feeling blown, he sank into an easy stroll, which brought him after many minutes to his chosen hiding-place—a shed in a field remote from any homestead. There was straw inside the shelter, on which he flung himself to wait for sleep.

At first he lay and cursed his wanton daughter, the reason of his flight obscured by the more recent shock. Not that he was really prudish, as the word

is used, but because he drew the line at gentlefolks. Nell's townish affectations, and a strain of Cockney in her speech, had long since led him to expect that she would come to harm. For Jerry he could make allowances, but not for Nell. Her conduct outraged his despotic tenderness, his pride in wife and children. He swore to break every bone in her seductive body : the natural instinct of much wounded love. Pretty, was she ? He would soon change that ! He was filled with Calvinistic abhorrence of mere carnal charms.

But, as he lay and thought, the vision changed, and flaming whins appeared before him on the darkness. " At 'em, Parson ! At 'em, bo' !" he chuckled. Fire was his playmate and obedient geni.

The spirit of this man was such as may have animated the henchman of some feudal lord of old, who, through sheer loyalty, a noble sentiment, burnt crops and homesteads, slaying right and left. Staunch to a narrow creed and boasting principles, when that creed, those principles, were set at naught, he knew no mercy, and had found an arm in fire. At sixteen he had burnt a haystack to the ground because the owner of the same had thrashed him wrongfully. That was his first taste of power, and he was not found out. Since then he had assumed a kind of sovereignty, reposing on his sense of power—power to destroy the long results of labour, and smite the proud who fatten on men's toil. This power, he knew, belonged to every man who keeps a box of matches in his pocket ; but others were not bold enough to use it. Those others had no certain knowledge of his deeds ; they breathed the

mere suspicion of them in convulsive whispers ; but all were conscious of the dignity those deeds conferred. In his time he had destroyed a fortune in farm property, and not a single crime had ever been brought home to him.

But to-night he tossed uneasily upon his bed of straw. The inspector of police himself had heard him threaten that old dear. If they caught him, as they must do soon or late, they might bring all their past suspicions up against him. They had been on his track more than once—about the fire on old John Forman's premises, about those barns, and then, again, about the fire in Mr. Willett's stack-yard. He had seen the last new moon through glass, he now remembered, and had stepped over two straws laid crossways on a path. It might be well to say a prayer against those omens. He knew a good one which his father's mother, a wise woman, had found prevail against the powers of evil.

Halfway through the doggerel, which he intoned aloud, a thought occurred to him, which seemed to prove its efficacy. He lay back, hushed and gaping, as before a miracle. Old Harraby Vasey was a highty-tighty kind of man. It would hurt his pride good tidily to hear of Jerry's goings-on with Nell. He would hardly dare to prosecute a man who had it in his power to publish such a story. Instead of leaving the neighbourhood for a time, as he had thought to do a minute since, the Dodman now resolved to see the old dear privately and come to terms ; upon which comfortable resolution he fell off to sleep.

At six o'clock next morning two of his adherents

came to see him, bringing food and beer. They had tried all likely hiding-places till they came to this one. He told them of the project which had been revealed to him, and all three chuckled as they talked it over.

"That'll sarve the old dear right, and no mistake," was the opinion of the visitors. "Yow marn't be hard on Jerry, though ; he's all right, he is. Howsever, as the sayin' goes, all's fair in war. Now dew yow mind, bo' ! Them there cops be arter yow. Harbut and Joe Tarpen's gone to lock-up, but they 'on't get wuss'n a fine ; whereby they'd let yow have it straight, was they to cotch ye."

"Trust me," was the reply.

It was a lovely morning. Mr. Ditcher, sitting in the doorway of his shed, surveyed a flowery fallow rising gently, like a bosom, to some woods which closed the view. Larks sang overhead in the blue ether ; innumerable rabbits played about the field. Fumbling in his pockets eagerly, he grieved to find he had not got a catapult about his person, nor the means to make one. Dejected for a moment, he swore roundly. But a robin, emblem of good luck, perched near his refuge ; and, looking round, he saw a noble jug of beer. What with eating, drinking, and contemplation of the charms of Nature through tobacco-smoke, the day passed.

As soon as night was falling he set out, refreshed and confident, and made his way by paths of his own tracing to the Grange, with circumspection to avoid the haunts of men. Approaching from the heath, he came first to the kitchen premises, and paused a moment, half inclined to make his applica-

tion there, but chose the bolder course, proceeding to the front-door. The butler, seeing who it was, appeared transfixed.

"Guvnor in?" asked Mr. Ditcher, squaring up, with one hand resting jauntily upon his hip.

"Back door," said Grain, with dignity.

Mr. Ditcher thrust his foot in to prevent the door from closing.

"Just yow say it's him he wish to cotch—John Ditcher, as they call the Dodman—and I guess he'll see me fast enough."

Grain was expostulating, with a very angry face, but suddenly he stepped back and held the door wide open, saying: "Here's a man, sir, asks to see you."

Mr. Harraby Vasey had just come into the hall.

"You!" he exclaimed, on recognition of the visitor. His frown was of amazement. "Come in here!"

He led the way across the hall into a sitting-room, Mr. Ditcher following, a little daunted by the splendours he perceived on all hands. Shut in the study, and confronted sternly by the gentleman, he quite forget the telling speech he had prepared. The silence growing terrible, he plunged:

"That's about your son and my Nelly. This here can't go on. He ha' wronged my pore gel that crule as I fare fit to kill un, that I dew!"

Mr. Harraby Vasey's disconcertion gave the Dodman courage.

"They was up o' ta heth last night together, goin' on disgraceful! Ta fire surprised 'em. I fare right on-sensed to think on ut. My pratty maw, my

Nelly, and that innercent!—a babe, ye may say! I'll take and shame un afore all the county—the young blackguard!”

“I don't believe a word of this,” said Mr. Harraby Vasey in a voice that strove for firmness. “Just wait a minute!” He rang the bell. “Send Mr. Gerald here at once,” he told the servant who appeared.

The Dodman kept expatiating on his wrongs till Jerry came.

“Were you on the heath last night with this man's daughter?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Thank you; you can go.”

“But there was nothing wrong about it——”

“Go, I tell you!”

With a glance of scorn at the informer, Jerry went.

The Dodman rubbed his hands and grinned triumphantly.

“There, you see, sir; that be Gawspel trewth I telled ye. Now, yow don't want for to prosecute him whose daughter your son ha' took and wronged oncommon crule. That'd be ongain for yow. Yow let me be, and warn them cops off, and maybe I 'on't say nawn.”

“You will not intimidate me. This shall make no difference.”

“Oh, 'on't that? On'y think! I 'on't say nawthun.” Mr. Ditcher winked.

“If your daughter has been wronged, as you say, some reparation will be made to her. Good-evening.”

Accepting that assurance as a full surrender, Mr. Ditcher felt so sure of safety that, leaving the Grange, he went home by the public road. He even said good-night to a policeman whom he passed, and was amused to see the bobby turn and stare. As he entered his own home, his wife shrieked out as at a ghostly apparition.

“ Kip away ! My Gawd ! Dew go back ! Run ! They’re arter yow, and they ha’ found out suffen sarious.”

“ Don’tee fret, old mawther !” he retorted, chuckling. “ I ha’ stopped their game all right ; seed the old dear hisself, and left un all of a muck-wash for fear as I’ll let on as his dear boy ha’ been a-coortin’ Nell.”

“ What !” screamed Nelly, springing up and throwing off her town refinement in a trice. “ You muck, you ! Dragglin your own daughter’s character ! Jerry’s my trew friend, not what you go thinkin’. I’m goin’ now at once to tell the gentleman as you’re a dutty liar.”

She was pinning on her hat before the Dodman fully realized that it was his own daughter who had spoken thus undutifully. Mouthing, with face inflamed, he raised his arm ; but his wife caught it and clung close to him, entreating :

“ Don’t’ee, John ; for Gawd’s sake, don’t ! Don’t carse her solemn !”

“ Ye good-for nawn, ongrateful maw——” the Dodman was beginning, when the house-door opened, and a cheerful voice inquired :

“ John Ditcher here ?”

The figure of a tall policeman filled the doorway.

"Just step outside along o' us, John, please. You're wanted, sir."

"I'll come along, but 'stead o' goin' to ta station, yow'll kindly take me round to Mr. Thingamy Vasey's. Him and me've made friends,"

"That's no matter. I ha' got a warrant for ye about that little job o' Mr. Willett's ricks. Quiet, now! There's tew on us, so don't yow think o' fightin'. That'll go agen ye."

The Dodman's jaw fell, and his eyes were glazed with horror. He whined, "I never done it, sir," while they snapped on the handcuffs. His wife uttered shriek on shriek, then fainted clean away in Nelly's arms; the children in the chamber overhead woke up and howled in concert.

A little crowd collected at the gate, at sight of which the Dodman donned a jaunty air. He was marched down to the Chequers, where a cart stood waiting. In the course of the drive to Nornham, he learnt that the police, searching his cottage and an outhouse in his absence, had discovered something they had long been seeking—to wit, a reaphook with some marks burnt on the handle, which Mr. Willett had thrown down an hour before the fire, and when the fire broke out had failed to find, though he was first upon the scene and looked for it.

"That's all old Vasey's dewun," thought the Dodman to himself. "If he hadn't took to grabbin' that there common, there'd ha' been no sarch made. If I live and am spared, I'll pay un some day—mean ole divill!"

XXIX

ARRIVING at Liverpool Street Station shortly before noon of a very hot day, Bredbane made arrangements for his luggage to be delivered at his chambers in Pump Court, and himself walked out into the City streets. He had overcome his bitterness sufficiently to seem magnanimous to Beryl when they parted overnight, and knew with scorn that he had thereby won her lasting reverence; the while his state of mind resembled that of fallen angels, the contrast of his outcast plight with blissful memories turning all his thoughts to execration.

It was the season of the August exodus. An endless stream of four-wheeled cabs and omnibuses, with luggage stacked upon the roofs and eager faces at the windows, threaded the traffic to the Eastern terminus. And he alone was thrown against the stream. The sun had been a splendour in the country, but here his beams suffused a beery haze; the humming streets were stifling, and smelt foul.

The snobbishness of intellect is far more horrible than that of birth, because it is at war with the existing order. Bredbane had suffered torments from it in his struggling years. What he called his Socialism and his atheism were compounded of a grievance against all society, and the contempt which every cheapjack feels towards the wares he

deals in, which in his case were accepted notions. The grievance spurred ambition, but distressed him greatly ; and comfort was his one desire in life. Engaged to Beryl, he had deemed his troubles ended, had revelled in the ordered life at Larkmeadow. The fervour of reform he had himself inspired in Mr. Harraby Vasey had struck him lately as absurd, an aberration. And now he was cast out.

Against Beryl personally he retained no grudge, for maidens are not reasonable creatures ; it was Mr. Harraby Vasey's tone that made him feel vindictive. The rich man's parting words had been insulting, as addressed to one to whom, as a politician, he owed practically everything :

" I'm grieved, my boy ; but, there, it can't be helped. You mustn't let this trouble you too deeply. We shall hope to see you sometimes. You have been so helpful to me, I shall really miss you."

The intellectual snob is not a prig. He despises scruples, and derides the moral code by which his analogue of birth is strongly bound. Honour and dishonour are mere names to him. Bredbane meant to be revenged on his insulter, and thought on vengeance with the gusto of a savage, although the plan he had evolved was highly civilized. He climbed to the top of an omnibus, and so drifted through the traffic by the Mansion House, past St. Paul's, and on down Ludgate Hill. Halfway up Fleet Street, he got down and went up a side-street to the office of the *Flame*, a Conservative morning paper. There, in a dim nook at the top of grimy stairs, where men of all sorts pushed him without ceremony, he asked for Mr. Evans, an old friend. After waiting for

some minutes, seeing sordid figures come and go, hearing telephone bells ring out on all hands, he was fetched by a page-boy. He found his friend in a large room upstairs, struggling into the coat he had left off for work, and at the same time brushing his hair before a bit of looking-glass.

"How are you, old man?" he cried, at sight of Bredbane. "I'm just off to lunch. Come with me! . . . Back in half an hour," he added for the information of a colleague; and, picking up his hat, dashed out, propelling Bredbane.

"Back in half an hour," he shouted once more as he passed the outer office.

"Where shall we go?" he asked, when they were in the street.

"Somewhere not too crowded, for I want to talk."

"Come on, then!" He dashed up into Fleet Street, hailed a passing hansom, and they were driven to the Arundel Hotel, where, in a corner of the quiet dining-room, Bredbane told the story of Mr. Harraby Vasey's struggle with the braves of Larkmeadow, and the scenes which he himself had witnessed on the previous night.

"I've been treated devilish badly by the man, and feel revengeful," he confessed. "But it does seem a telling situation when you think he's a Liberal candidate. I thought of you, coming up in the train. It might be worth your money in the silly season. I've come to you first."

Evans had been taking notes upon his shirt-cuff.

"Harraby Vasey—Larkmeadow!" he sighed. "The names alone! I'll send down little Johnson;

he's a clever devil, and it's just his line. We started a correspondence last week—White Slave Traffic—fairly juicy, you'd have thought ; and Elson wrote a brilliant letter as a victim. But it's proved a frost. The public are all bent on holiday-making, and too lazy to join in. The staff kept it up till to-day, when we decided to drop it. Your Larkmeadow's a godsend—something really comic ! I'll tell you what : you just come back with me and write a report of that meeting just as you've described it. I can spare two columns. Be a charitable man ! We're horribly short of copy, or I wouldn't victimize you. You haven't done any reporting since we worked together on the *Leveller*. Much too fat and famous ! It will do you good."

They returned to the newspaper office, where Bredbane managed to turn out two columns in the mock-heroic vein. It took him just an hour. Then, with no more than a nod to Evans, who was full of work, he left the noisy building. Writing of Larkmeadow had revived his longing for all that world of solid worth and decent manners he had made his own. It disgusted him with London, with his work and everything. He could not face the echoes of Pump Court.

All at once he thought of Ethel Harraby, whom he had sometimes in his heart preferred to Beryl. Most likely she was out of town, but the mere chance of seeing her and telling her his griefs revived him wonderfully. He went by train to High Street, Kensington, whence five minutes' easy walking brought him to the block of mansions she inhabited. The word " In " appeared against her name upon

the indicator in the hall. Ethel herself, in outdoor garb, admitted him.

"What—you!" she cried. "Oh, do come in! I've just had four whole sheets from Cousin Beryl—an emotional confession smudged with tears. You poor dear man! You must have had a time! I know my relatives. Beryl says you have behaved most nobly. How did you contrive it? I am dying to hear the details of the scene."

Her coolness, clothed in every charm, was very soothing. Her room, too, was luxurious, precluding other agitations than those caused by her skilled movements. With her wild-rose colour, yellow hair, naïve eyes, and slender figure, she was child-like in appearance, yet had all a woman's guile. She was a civilized and subtle creature—not, like Beryl, elementary. It was a pleasure to lie back and watch her in the atmosphere of understanding.

"It's really too bad of uncle—after all you've done for him," she said when he had told her all. "So like him, though, to take it all for granted. Why, you made him what he is, politically. A pity you can't undo all your work, like fairy god-mothers!"

"I mean to try," said Bredbane, with clenched teeth.

"Do tell me how!" she questioned eagerly. "I promise not to tell a living soul."

Bredbane offered no resistance; he exposed his plan, and she looked hard at him.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed. "But how amusing! And it serves him right. Poor Uncle Richard! Don't let it go too far. You mustn't

really. Do you know, I'm just a little bit afraid of you?"

A civilized and suave malevolence was her ideal of manly conduct. A man, she considered, should be pitiless in defending his own dignity, his own interests. Good nature, purposeless, like Jerry's, she condemned as weakness, and could never manage to regard its victims quite as equals. Now Alfred's swift vindictiveness appealed to her; the antic turn he gave his vengeance touched her heart. She felt curious about him; and in Ethel curiosity usurped the throne of passion, and wore its garb with all the cunning of imposture.

"You'll have some tea?" She rose and rang the bell. "Or would you rather have a whisky-and-soda after all your agitations?"

Bredbane chose tea. "But you were going out," he put in rather lamely, aware that the perception came a little late.

"I still am. But it's not important—only needful shopping. Life's dull at present; all my swains are out of town. I go away myself on Monday, down to Larkmeadow, where I shall watch the working of your plot with interest. You don't look well!" She eyed him critically. "You need cheering up. Suppose, if you have nothing else to do, you take me out to dinner somewhere, and on to the Exhibition. You must be kept from moping; it's too silly, since you and Beryl never really hit it off. You will? That's right; I shall be ready to be fetched at seven o'clock precisely."

As Alfred went back to his rooms to change his

clothes, he hummed an air, and had no bitter feelings. Old Harraby Vasey was no worse than a conceited ass whose plunge, when lashed, it would be fun to witness ; towards Beryl he felt kindly ; while for the mistress of the Grange he cherished now, as always, a profound affection. It pleased him to reflect that Ethel was her favourite niece.

XXX

HER father's arrest stopped Nelly Ditcher from going hotfoot to the Grange, and, after a night spent in efforts to console her mother, she lacked the energy which such a step demanded. Instead, she went and told her grief to Mr. Catchpole, who said :

“ Don't worry, Nell. I'll put that right.”

He had already been adjured by Jerry to come up and help.

With mind unhinged already by events which showed him the heroic butt of fate, Mr. Harraby Vasey had, upon the Dodman's tidings, lost all touch of earth. He fell into romantic transports, talked of the “ unhappy girl,” of “ some amends ” as needful, and eyed his only son with pious horror. When Mr. Catchpole laughingly assured him that no harm was done, he gasped and goggled like a fish flung suddenly on dry ground.

“ I tell you what I'd do,” said Mr. Catchpole in conclusion. “ Let your good lady have the girl to see her. Like that, you'll see the sort she is, and know there ain't no call for you to worry. I'd say, go yourself and see her, only you'd get mobbed by her mother, who's in a way about her man being took up.”

This seemed a good idea, and it was carried out. Mrs. Harraby Vasey invited Nelly to the Grange one

afternoon, and gave her tea. Well pleased with her behaviour and address, she was sitting beside her on a sofa, showing photographs of all her children from the earliest ages, when Mr. Harraby Vasey entered with impatience, considering the girl had stayed quite long enough. Beholding such amenities, he bit his lip ; but still, when Nelly was presented to him, he shook hands and smiled, and twice expressed the hope he saw her well.

" More presentable than I expected," he informed his wife ; " but that makes Jerry's conduct less excusable."

That Jerry's aberration had been innocent increased his horror. He might, perhaps, have made allowance for a momentary lapse from virtue ; but this liking for the conversation of a girl whose speech was common evinced, in his opinion, real depravity. He frowned upon his son, and spoke to him as to a dog.

Jerry did not rebel. He had transgressed conventions which he had always known to have the weight of laws. The way in which his folly was discovered, the Dodman's crude attempt at blackmail, the farcical dimensions of his father's wrath—the whole exposure made him feel the last of men.

" I'm afraid you get it all from me," his mother told him. " I have all my life been told I can't distinguish between different classes. But I do recognize that it's a serious fault. You see, the world has rules which people must observe, to be respected. Your father is much wiser than we are ; he would not be so upset without good reason. And really, Jerry, I myself was shocked. It was deceitful ; and that can't be right, you know."

"But he talks as if these folks were scarcely human——"

"They have been so hostile to him that he naturally looks on your consorting with them as a kind of treason. I don't know what to do, it's all so miserable. It doesn't seem like home, with all this trouble in the house."

Ethel also, when she came and heard the scandal, told Jerry plainly what she thought about him.

"You've behaved like an utter cad!" she said on their first walk together, tilting her pretty chin disdainfully.

"But there was really no harm at all."

"I should think better of you if there had been!"

The sole excuse to her mind for a youth of education in frequenting girls of that class was the hope of favours greater than nice women grant to boys. That Jerry, whom she had herself accustomed to refined seductions, could afterwards take pleasure in a Nelly Ditcher's mere society, incensed her pride.

"You needn't be so down upon a man," he murmured. "I get enough of that from dad. You know I'm sorry, so you might stick up for me."

"Not in a case of this sort," she retorted. "I think you know that I'm your friend at all times. If you ever fall really in love with a nice girl, you can command me. I will help you against everyone. Don't think I side with the authorities. It's simply that the present case is too disgusting!" They were returning through the village in the cool of the evening; the disused windmill stood up black against the sunset, up on the heath, the scene of Jerry's disconcertion. Before the Chequers, at the

cottage gates, men capped them, grinning ; women bobbed and smiled ; " Good-evenun, Mas'r Jerry," came from all hands ; and he acknowledged all the greetings bravely, aware of a keen critic at his side.

" You're popular, I see," she sneered ; " I wish you weren't. The idol of such people must be rather vile."

" They're not bad sorts at all," he answered hotly. And there ensued a rather bitter argument, which was reopened every time they met alone.

Believing that a story to his disadvantage was known to all the neighbourhood, he shunned society. When Ethel proposed to him the walk to Cloverfield, which had become a fixed event of all her visits, he declined.

" Don't be so childish," she exclaimed in real vexation, regarding his attendance as her natural right. " What does it matter if you do get teased a little ? If you go on like this, you'll get quite morbid."

Still he refused, and so she went without him, in the carriage with her aunt, who recollected that she owed a visit to the farm.

" You are a pig," she said on her return. " You spoilt it all for me. I missed you so ! It seems I'm destined to play mentor in these days. Alice is in disgrace too. Not a bit the same. Quite tamed and frightened-looking, though I did my best to cheer her. All the boys were out. In the intervals of Alice, I could listen to the talk of our two elders touching illness and medicaments. Between ourselves, I never was so bored. Come, Jerry, make it up ! I won't be horrid !"

The kiss she offered with these words gave full indulgence. She was not prodigal of her caresses ; but when she gave one, it was done artistically, in a manner to secure his lasting memory. His outlook brightened.

Beryl was in a state of nervous breakdown ; and Mr. Harraby Vasey, undergoing the reaction due to great excitements, complained of aches, and kept his room for several days ; while his wife, distressed by so much sadness in the house, was constant in attendance on the invalids. From Mr. Catchpole Jerry heard what news there was : how the Dodman had been committed for trial at the next Assizes, and how the news had roused some feeling in the village, where minds were still excited.

"The newspapers have got on our affairs somehow," the speaker chuckled. "A young chap called at mine—wanted to know my views. He got 'em too. He've been to every cottage on the street."

As soon as he felt well enough to stir abroad Mr. Harraby Vasey drove to Nornham, having to apologize to the local Liberal Association for his failure to attend a certain meeting. Alighting at a draper's shop, in haste to cross the pavement (it was raining hard), he ran into his cousin Robert.

"Well, how does fame feel?" asked the farmer. "What! Haven't you seen those pieces in the *Flame* on 'Lively Larkmeadow'? Here, I've got one on me ; you can keep it. We've been having fun about it at the ordinary."

The owner of the shop came bowing from behind the counter as Mr. Harraby Vasey entered with the

paper in his hand. He led the way into a private room, exclaiming :

“ Hope you’re better, sir. We missed you, but the meeting went off very well, considering. By the way, sir, what’s the cause of all this clamour in the London papers now ? We’re all a-wondering.”

“ I’ve just this minute heard of it. I have a paper here which I shall read as I go home. Are the articles in any way offensive ?”

“ Dear me, no ! The one I saw was complimentary to you personally. But the Liberals in the town here reckon it’s a Tory move. They’ll begin politely, and work up to disagreeables. I wouldn’t put no faith in them, if I was you, sir.”

His curiosity thus roused, it was with a thrill that Mr. Harraby Vasey opened out the journal when once more seated in his carriage. The issue, he perceived, was five days old. From the centre page these headlines stared at him :

“ LIVELY LARKMEADOW.

“ RIOT IN EAST ANGLIAN VILLAGE.

“ PROSPECTIVE LIBERAL CANDIDATE MOBBED BY
PEASANTRY.”

XXXI

THE article opened with a description of Larkmeadow—"one of those delightful old-world hamlets still existent in the Eastern Counties," "a sleepy hollow, undisturbed for ages." The heath and disused windmill were then painted in. For years, through the kindness or carelessness of landowners, that heath had been a playground for the village youngsters. Now Mr. Harraby Vasey, a new-comer to the district—"a furriner, as Larkmeadovians put it"—announced his wish to close the heath and fence across a footpath leading to it. All Larkmeadow was up in arms. The parish made inquiries; they were told that Mr. Harraby Vasey's title to the heath was good in law, but that a right-of-way across it might, perhaps, be claimed. But the parish council had no assets, and litigation involves costs. Mr. Harraby Vasey himself paid for counsel's opinion, which was adverse to the villagers, and proposed at a general parish meeting an action hostile to his own apparent interests. Instead of being cheered, he was insulted. The villagers could not believe he acted openly. As a crowning protest, the angry peasantry set fire to the disputed heath. "Dense clouds of lurid smoke obscured the moonlight. The usually peaceful village was in tumult."

The report concluded with a short account of Mr.

Harraby Vasey, "a quiet, rather nervous gentleman, the living picture of benevolence," and the information that he had been lately chosen Liberal candidate for the division.

At first sight he judged it a fair statement, and experienced a glow of pleasure at the praise accorded to him. At home he let his wife and daughter read it, merely remarking that he wondered who had sent it up; but after dinner, when he reperused it in the quiet of his study, he thought it might convey a wrong idea. A casual reader, unacquainted with the details, might fancy he convened the parish meeting in bad faith. He sat late at his desk concocting a long letter which strengthened the weak points of the report. Reading that letter over in the morning, he found the tone too plaintive, and composed another. This, when completed, he read out to Ethel, who came into his room in search of blotting-paper.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"I think it's splendid. You have brought out all the points," was her rejoinder.

He read it through again, however, critically, and erased a word or two before he posted it.

That done, he felt the need of relaxation, and as the weather had improved, proposed a picnic. Mrs. Harraby Vasey fell in with his whim, though she herself found little pleasure in such outings. She, with her husband and Beryl, went in the carriage, Jerry and Ethel on their bicycles, to a lonely spot upon the coast, where Mr. Harraby Vasey wandered off in search of amber, hat in hand, letting the sea-breeze lave his forehead and uplift his hair. The

sea looked sleepy ; every wave that broke upon the beach was like a yawn. Beryl stretched her length upon the shingle, Jerry and Ethel paddled after starfish, while Mrs. Harraby Vasey had her book and needlework precisely as at home. The maid they had brought with them prepared tea, to which the wanderers were summoned by loud shouts. On the drive home, Mr. Harraby Vasey was in high good humour, and announced that he was feeling ten years younger. As the carriage turned in at the Grange drive-gate, the house and its surroundings seemed so charming that he almost wished that he had been content with their possession, and never hankered after public life.

This yearning seemed a premonition when, indoors, he found a lot of newspapers awaiting him, with a line from the Liberal agent requesting him to read at places marked in them. After looking through these in his study his brain reeled. Either the world was mad, or he himself was. For papers of all colours raved of Larkmeadow—"Larks at Larkmeadow!"—"Lawlessness at Larkmeadow!"—till the reader lost his sense of all proportion and saw Larkmeadow as large as London. In one place he figured as "the squire, the local despot," in another as "a purse-proud parvenu."

He called in Ethel as a woman of the world, and asked her judgment.

"It seems like madness," she admitted. "Mid-summer madness—perhaps that's the origin of the phrase. You know they write up anything in what they call the silly season. In your place, I should write to Mr. Bredbane ; he knows all their habits."

It seemed the best way to let Alfred know his shot had told ; and she knew so little of the journalistic world as to imagine he could stop the game which he had started.

" A bright idea !" replied her uncle, and he wrote that evening.

Bredbane's answer, which came promptly, gave no hope, although its tone of jocularity relieved the strain a little.

" I was wondering," he wrote, " what friend at court was booming you so strongly in the London Press, and I could only think you had subscribed enormous sums to the Personal Press Association. If, as you suppose, some enemy has done this thing, I must say he is doing you a rare good turn. The great thing nowadays is to be known, and you are the best-known man in England at this time of writing. You will be asked to be director of all sorts of companies, and undergo a perfect plague of begging letters. Joking apart, the only thing is to keep cool. All this will soon blow over, and you will find that it has done your reputation much less harm than good."

" Dear Alfred !" said Mr. Harraby Vasey, as he handed the letter to his niece, who was his chief support at that time, Jerry being still unpardoned. " He has a sense of humour just like mine ! It does one good."

" I wonder who the man can be who started it," said Ethel, following the lead the letter gave her.

" I have no doubt on that point," said her uncle, frowning suddenly. From the first he had connected this new persecution with his cousin Robert's

presence at the parish meeting. Robert was Lord Mells's creature, and the Earl had been in London at that time. What more likely than that Robert had attended the meeting by his lordship's order, for the purpose of obtaining "copy" for the Tory Press? that Lord Mells, receiving his report, had put forth all his influence to strike a man whom he regarded as a public nuisance? All this he carefully explained to Ethel, adding :

"I have long had reason to distrust those men. Robert cannot forgive my better standing, nor Lord Mells my refusal to regard myself as a product of the estate."

The fact that in the newspapers stress was laid upon his being a newcomer—which was Robert's point—and that Robert had been first to tell him of the journalistic storm, confirmed his faith in this conjecture. He did not mention it, however, save that once to Ethel, and once to Mr. Wellingham, the Nornham draper, who exclaimed :

"Oh no, sir! Surely, sir, I can't think that!"

"Of course I can't be positive," he answered; but shook his head as one who had, alas! no doubts.

The Liberal agent came over to discuss the trouble, and told him not to worry, it would soon blow over.

"Just you do what Mr. Bredbane tells you in that letter you've just read me. Keep cool, and don't, whatever they do, take action just at present. It won't hurt you to let 'em demonstrate and play the fool a bit. If you answer back they'll make it hotter for you. That's their game."

"I have wondered whether it might not be best to present that land to the parish."

“For mercy’s sake, not that, sir! That’d ruin all. Our people like a man to hold his own; and in the end they’re bound to turn and back a local man against the Londoners. After a month or so of this you won’t seem like a stranger to ’em any longer; and that’s half the battle.”

Seeing everyone whom he consulted gave the same advice, Mr. Harraby Vasey could not but accept and follow it, though the passive rôle enjoined was irksome in the face of daily provocations.

His letter to the *Flame* was printed with a headline :

“LARKMEADOW AFFAIR

MR. HARRABY VASEY’S STATEMENT,”

and had for footnote this brief comment :

“Mr. Harraby Vasey trumpets what our correspondent never even hinted—viz., that he submitted his case for judgment to a parish meeting because that meeting was likely to be more friendly to him than a court of law. In these days when Radicals assure us that all natural weakness is inherently Conservative, it is refreshing to meet with one so frankly human as this country gentleman.”

In a weekly journal, consecrated to the people’s rights, he was referred to as “the man Vasey,” just as Roundheads spoke of the man Charles, and warned that the *Recording Angel* had its eye on him. The menace sent a shudder down his spine.

XXXII

LARKMEADOW was now placed under the microscope for the entertainment and instruction of the rest of England. The inhabitants of London and Manchester became acquainted with the characters of Harbut and Joe Turpin, of the Dodman, "rustic Mirabeau, snatched from his friends by an unfortunate incident in his career, not unconnected with the 'rickyard' of one farmer Willett"; of Mr. Catchpole, "a retired policeman, who watches over Larkmeadow in that capacity"; of Mr. Pretious, "the old village Atheist, and Mr. Harraby Vasey's staunch supporter"; of Mr. Rush, "the genuine old-fashioned farmer"; of the new vicar striding round the parish, pipe in mouth. The village champions were portrayed as sturdy ploughmen and bright fisher-lads, lounging against the background of the heath and windmill. Gorgeous sunsets were described; birds sang deliriously, and "Larkmeadovian" became a word of common use.

The writers dealt in homely and pathetic details; for example:

"I discovered Mrs. Ditcher in her garden, engaged in watering a little bed of lovely asters. A fair-haired baby boy clung to her skirts. When asked to give her views upon the subject of the heath, she held her apron to her eyes. The question roused

such painful memories. She said in broken tones : " I do not know the rights of the dispute ; but this I know "—she laid a fond hand on the forehead of her child—" the little ones have always been allowed to play there, and it seems hard that little Teddy should be stopped from playing where his father and his grandfather have played before him."

For comic relief " my friend the ratcatcher "—a being quite unknown in Larkmeadow—was introduced, who made insane remarks in Devon dialect. The place was dubbed Elysian, Arcadian, anything but native English ; making it evident that a natural community seemed more abnormal to the writers than a London slum.

The effect of fame upon the village worthies was electrical. Dejected by the verdict of the parish meeting and weakened by the absence of their leader, they had given up all hope ; when, lo ! the heavens themselves took up their cause.

" I ollust say as there's a Provender in them things," said Harbut in the evening conclave at the Chequers. " There's One above'll see as wrong don't win. A pity as t' old Dodman baint no more among us. That'd ha' done un good to hearken to a piece like this "—he slapped a newspaper spread out before him on the table—" That there Vasey thought as, now he'd got ta Dodman safe in quod, he 'ouldn't have no trouble 'long of us ; but that don't pruve nawthin'. 'Cause he done wrong i' ta past that don't say as Dodman worn't right about this here job. Mucky tricks, I call ut."

The newspaper campaign made many converts. Seeing it in print that they had voted against legal

action only out of economic prudence, people believed the statement, and declared the heath was common the more readily that Mr. Harraby Vasey seemed completely crushed. Mr. Rush, always afraid to stand alone, became an open sympathizer with the rebels, and even bore his part in demonstrations. All were conscious that the outcry must be three parts joke ; indeed, the reporters were made quiet fun of by the men they interviewed—one of them thought potatoes grew on trees—but the agitation fanned a fire which had been nearly dead.

From distant parts, afoot, on bicycles, in carts and carriages, came people all agog to view the sites and persons with which their daily papers had familiarized them. Some of these advised the malcontents : “ You should have processions. That’s the way they did at Alstead, a case the same as yours. No one can’t hurt you if you march together, with banners and inscriptions, singing songs.”

Accordingly there were processions every Sunday afternoon and on weekday evenings, when sufficient numbers could be mustered, led with rough music, waving shabby flags ; in which the riff-raff of a dozen places bore a part. When he drove through the village Mr. Harraby Vasey met derisive cheers, and heard the children chant :

“ Old Dick Vasey
Fared like crazy
’Cause a poor man plucked a daisy ”

—a tropical allusion to the blackberrying incident, by that time known throughout the length and

breadth of England. He was called "Dicky" (which means donkey in the country dialect), and was caricatured by someone as a braying jackass standing on a heap of carrots and stretching out his neck to reach another, which was withdrawn, however, by an urchin, who cried: "No, you don't!" This picture, drawn on an enormous piece of cardboard, was carried in the Sunday processions, which the new Vicar tried in vain to stop.

The only men who dared to scoff at these proceedings were Mr. Catchpole, Mr. Meadows, and their colleagues on the parish council. Though tickled by the baiting of so grand a gentleman, these elders thought the joke had gone too far.

"A lot of silly rubbish!" was their verdict.

"They'll take and wholly craze the poor old dear!" said Mr. Meadows, and Mr. Catchpole, having the same fear, gave Jerry warning of the demonstrations when he could, to the end that Mr. Harraby Vasey might be kept from seeing them.

"I'd give anything to spare your father that," he told his friend. "There's a rough lot come from Nornham, and from Lowestoft even. That hurt my feelings, too, good tidily; because, you see, that's all against the council, and we can't do nothing. We did ought to have power to keep order in a homely way."

This state of things prevailed throughout August and half of September, till the village became aware that its doings were no longer interesting. On the first Saturday in September Mr. Harraby Vasey, by misfortune, met one of those processions, of whose existence he had heard with incredulity.

He was walking with Beryl in his private grounds—to be particular, among the fir-trees which adjoined the heath—Jerry and Ethel followed at a distance. The setting sun had stained the tree-trunks red as blood ; the song of birds went up from all the landscape. Suddenly his ears were outraged by most frightful discords—a music of tin kettles, mouth organs, Jew's harps, concertinas, combs in tissue paper, and a cornet. A rabble of small boys and girls with blackened faces, all wearing paper caps and waving home-made flags, ran on before the demonstrators. Catching sight of its enemy, the mob hooted and yelled ; the music ceased as if by magic, and a halt was called. A go-cart was pushed forward. In it sat a dummy dressed up in black coat and trousers, a golf cap on its head, and on its chest a placard : “ Greedy Dicky ! ” There were roars of laughter.

Mr. Harraby Vasey, near enough to be heard, called out good-temperedly :

“ You're wrong in your dates, my men. This isn't the fifth of November.”

“ There's rum old guys about, though ! ” came the cheeky answer. “ He wholly favour yow. We're goin' to barn him presently.” Amid the wild applause which hailed this witticism, the rough music blared once more, and the procession moved on slowly towards the home-made stile.

On a sudden prompting Jerry sprang to his father's side.

“ I tell you what, dad—ask them in to have some beer ! ” He spoke excitedly.

Mr. Harraby Vasey turned a freezing gaze upon his son ; he seemed to gather all the venom in his composition, and then eject it in a single word :
" Buffoon !"

He went indoors and shut himself into his study.

XXXIII

EVERY morning Jerry was expected to write letters and do business for his father, but after that his time was all his own. Whatever the weather, he went out and stretched his legs till tea-time, which was five o'clock. His evenings were devoted to hard reading. He had exhumed old Greek and Latin class-books and divers works in French and German, which he learnt to value. For relaxation he devoured good English novels and much poetry. It was a period of education, unrecognized by him as such because delightful, evolving without pain a system of philosophy which was stable, being founded on his character and private tastes. The youth who had dispersed a fortune in two years at Cambridge found happiness in books and lonely rambles. His studious tastes and heartfelt love of Nature, hitherto hidden as averse to manliness, became acknowledged sources of enjoyment. After various impersonations, he was now himself—admittedly a fool at most things, and resigned to mediocrity.

“Why can't Jerry turn over a new leaf and be sociable?” Mr. Harraby Vasey asked his wife, with some asperity. “I have not been hard on him, considering ; he need not sulk. He's always either mooning over books or tramping. That sort of thing won't mend matters.”

He was wrong. That sort of thing was mending matters healthily. Moreover, Jerry was not sulky, only so preoccupied that all companionship was vexing as an interruption. Even Mr. Catchpole had no visit from him for some weeks; he conceived a bad opinion of the new Vicar—a pipe-smoking bachelor, well-liked already—solely because the latter strove to cheer him up; and when he met Eric Tavan on the Nornham road one evening he had much ado to hide his irritation.

Eric stopped his car—a new one—and got out, walking with Jerry until out of hearing of the chauffeur. It was the golden close of a wet day. The hedgerow trees dripped heavily, although the road reflected sunshine.

“I’m in a fix, old man,” he murmured tragically. “I should love to call at your place, but I daren’t. There’s your sister. It’s a devilish delicate position. She might think, you know.”

“I expect she thinks already,” replied Jerry carelessly. “We’ve all been wondering why you haven’t been.”

“Fact is, dear man, she as good as told me to clear out, in the summer, just before I went to Switzerland. I’ve been perfectly wretched. And now that her engagement’s broken off, she might think, if I came forward, that I thought it was on my account.”

“It does look like it,” murmured Jerry, with a smile.

“That’s just what makes it quite impossible for me to face her.”

“Why not go and see my father, and condole with him? He’s been having a rough time.”

"I know. A horrid shame! Everybody wants to know who set it going."

"Old Catchpole, who's a wise old bird, suspects that fellow Bredbane."

If his ears had been saluted with rank blasphemy, Tavan could not have shown more horror than at this suggestion. The quixotic creature idolized his rival.

"No, no!" he cried. "I can't stand that. A splendid fellow! The last man to do anything low down. . . . It worries me to think of that engagement broken off. He was just the man for her—a brilliant chap. I'm awfully afraid she may regret it. You really think that I might go and see your governor? I will, this minute. . . . I say, you might come with me, just to make things smooth."

The lover's ardour obliged Jerry to give up his walk and go back to the Grange in Eric's car.

To avoid such interruption, in the future, of dreams conducive to his mental growth, he generally walked by fieldpaths to Lord Mells's woods, where there was little fear of meeting anyone. The paths through them were swampy all the winter, the leafless trees looked dismal in the rain and sleet, and when the wind blew the whole forest wailed; but he could think his thoughts there undisturbed.

One dank and misty afternoon, when he was wandering in their depths, absorbed in dreams, he saw a figure coming towards him down a glade. He took it for a keeper's, or he would have turned and fled rather than meet his cousin Alice face to face. Her costume, a long mackintosh and a tweed hat, with gaiters showing under a short skirt, explained

his first mistake. She was strolling with hands buried in the spacious pockets of the waterproof, whose turned-up collar hid her cheeks provokingly. The chill air had put colour in those cheeks, her eyes were sparkling. He rather liked her unconcern with what she wore.

She stopped and said "Good-day" without a trace of that constraint which had so often wounded him, inquiring why he had not been to see them for so long a time.

"Haven't you heard of my misdeeds?" he answered dryly.

"Of course. But that's no reason for disowning us. Charley fancied you were siding with your father, who dislikes us for some reason."

"No ; it's only that I'm feeling such a beast."

"I know. I've been all through it. It is hateful, isn't it?"

She spoke with passion. Jerry showed surprise ; observing which, she stamped her foot and bit her lip. "I mean, I often feel a toad," she added in more even tones, looking delicious in her slight embarrassment. "So does everybody, I expect. When I get in the dumps I come out here and walk until I'm right again. People—even one's own people—make things worse. I had a mind to fly when I first saw you coming. Good-bye. I've got a short cut home right through this thicket. You'll come and see us, won't you?"

She was gone. Jerry resumed his thoughts, and lost remembrance of the chance encounter until late that night, when, sitting reading while the house slumbered, he heard Alice saying : "I often feel a

toad," and saw her face distinctly. The great and serious eyes ; the straight, thin nose ; the red lips slightly parted, showing pearly teeth, were there before him, and his heart beat strangely. The vision made him laugh, though why he could not tell ; and as he laughed a curious anguish seized him. He started up to pace the room distractedly, and went on doing so the whole night through. Nobody seemed really living except Alice and himself ; all others, Ethel even, were as plants and trees lining the glade down which she came to him. Her very leanness was the loveliest thing on earth, excelling other beauties, like desire ; and all her funny tricks of speech and gesture, her shyness and her awkwardness, so well remembered, were secret words of love.

The morning came, and found him still entranced. His father scolded him for wool-gathering when they worked together in the study. Directly after luncheon he went down into the village, and found Mr. Catchpole standing at his cottage gate.

" I want to talk to you."

" Well, let's stand here. I mustn't go indoors for fear of missing Mr. Medders on his way to market. I've got this note to give him," was the answer.

" I don't know how to tell you. . . . It's a very curious thing. . . . The fact is, I'm in love," said Jerry desperately.

" Well, that's a rum un—at your time of life ! And such a novelty, you never having been like that before."

" Shut up !" snapped Jerry, blushing hotly. " I'm

not fooling. It's the queerest thing! A girl I've known so long, and never thought of!"

"Not Miss Alice?"

"How did you know?" cried Jerry in a fury.

"I only wondered. Now, suppose you step indoors and talk to Katey. She'll give you better counsel than what I can. I'll stop out here and wait for Mr. Medders."

Jerry went in and spent an hour with Katey, uninterrupted by her father, who had never left them thus alone before. When he came out again, her father questioned:

"Well?"

Katey had warned him not to go too fast, but let the girl herself find out his secret in the course of time.

"Well, that's sound sense!" the ex-policeman chuckled. "We can't have you go rushing blindly like you've done afore. But what'll your dear father think, I wonder? He wholly love his cousin Robert, that we know!"

"I don't see how he could object," said Jerry vaguely, envisaging a far remote contingency. Things had not got to that stage yet, worse luck.

XXXIV

KATEY's advice, though well adapted to the nature of self-conscious maidens, was destined to prove useless in the case of Alice, who never thought herself the object of desire. Her capture by old Burridge in his orchard had brought on her a series of humiliations. Her father told her she was nothing but a vulgar hoyden, and wanted whipping like a boy to teach her manners. No one, he said, would ever marry such a monster. Her brother Charley, too, awaking to the consciousness that she was fully grown, took her to task for lacking social graces. In fact, she had for months been passing through an ordeal very similar to that endured by Jerry. Like Jerry, too, she had evolved a home philosophy, which in her case was the final one of resignation. Implicitly believing every word her father said, at eighteen she looked forward to old maidenhood, and tried to make herself believe she liked the prospect. Fear of being thought extremely awkward, especially by men, had caused her shyness in society. Now that she had accepted her cold fate, that shyness vanished, and she took a friendly interest in persons who had once alarmed her.

When Jerry called soon after their encounter in the woods, she noticed that he seemed uncomfortable and looked at her while talking to her aunt.

This she ascribed to shame of his misdoings, and her heart went out to him. Her aunt, withdrawing for a moment to fetch certain photographs which Roger, after whom he had inquired, had sent from India, she said kindly :

"What, still in the blues? I've quite got over mine."

"I have a pretty dismal time of it at home," he answered. "It's jolly to get off and talk to someone for an hour or two. If you'd let me come and see you sometimes, it would help a lot."

"Oh, do! Every day, if you like," she offered frankly; "though you'll find it different from old days. The boys are all away excepting Charley, and he's never in until the evening. But I'll do my best to help you mope."

Her aunt, returning, stopped the private conversation, which was not resumed; though Jerry slightly pressed her hand at parting, as if in token of the pact between them.

"You are improving," said her father, who had come in at the end of Jerry's visit and observed her critically. "You were quite civil to that fellow. That's the way. I see you're minding what I told you. Yes, by all means let him come here if he wants to. His father's treatment is enough to drive him to the deuce."

Alice thenceforward practised gracious manners upon Jerry, solely with a view to earn her father's praise. Not that she was indifferent to the visitor; on the contrary, she admired him greatly; he was clever and good-looking, such a contrast to herself; but that he did not come into her scheme of future

life to which her father's good opinion was essential. His evident delight in being with her she set down to home suppression, and was grateful for the chance that threw her with a man whose talk was educating.

One day when they were left alone together—which had seldom happened—he astonished her by saying :

“Do please talk about yourself. You tell me nothing.”

“There's nothing to tell. I'm so uninteresting,” she replied ingenuously.

“There's nothing else on earth I care to hear about,” said Jerry in a husky voice. “Alice !” he cried, and tried to take her hand.

“Oh, don't ! How dare you !” she exclaimed in terror. Snatching away her hand, she fled precipitately.

That her cousin had gone mad was indignation's first conjecture. Then she remembered his pretensions as a lady-killer, and her former dread of him on that account. It seemed a deadly insult ; her cheeks flamed. Her father had said that men would not respect her ; but it seemed hard that his words should be proved true by the misconduct of a friend, and at a time when she was behaving with extreme propriety. Liking Jerry, she resolved to have it out with him.

In the meanwhile her misjudged adorer had sped back to Larkmeadow to Mr. Catchpole's cottage, and walked off with Katey. For long they paced the quiet lane behind the church, debating painfully.

“You must remember that she's quite a young-

ster, Mr. Jerry, for all she's tall and stately. She's younger than what we are, and a babe in some ways. She's never been made love to, and no doubt you scared her. Don't lose heart, though. Now, I'll tell you a good plan. You go and say you're sorry, but in such a way as lets her know she's all you care about. Be as humble as you please, but make it plain you love her. Then go on as before, and bide your time."

"Katey, you're a brick. It's like new life to me. I'll do everything you say!"

He squeezed her hand in gratitude, evoking peals of muffled laughter.

"I can't help it, Mr. Jerry. It's too funny. To think of you we always thought the boldest, not to say the impudentest, boy on earth, taken bad this way, and fairly cuddling me for love of someone else! Take me home through the churchyard—that's the safest way—and offer me your arm, or folks 'll stare. 'Tis only gentry as walk independent. Thank goodness, that's as dark as dark can be; but I do wonder at father letting me be made so free with."

"You're a duck!" said Jerry.

"Oh, I know all that."

Mr. Harraby Vasey having gone to London for some days, there was no routine for Jerry on the morrow. Directly after breakfast he set off for Cloverfield.

It was a fine March morning; not a cloud obscured the sky. The leafless woods showed various hues of brown and purple, stirred and quickened by the caprice of the east wind. Rooks were building in

the elms behind the farm, whose russet roofs and honey-coloured stacks composed a township. A bend of the river winked a dark blue eye amid the pastures.

Half-way across the paddock Alice met him, hatless, enveloped in a long blue pinafore designed for housework. She must have seen him coming from the house.

"Look here, Jerry," she began, "I'm really angry! You were very silly yesterday, and you insulted me. I know men do behave like that to girls. Some girls may like it. Kindly understand I don't. Perhaps you meant it as a compliment, a kind of 'thank you' for my being friendly. Anyhow, don't do it again. You can't think how it hurt me."

"Hurt you!" moaned Jerry, quite beside himself. "I'd sooner die a thousand deaths, you know. . . . As if I ever felt like that for other girls! I don't know one that's fit to tie your shoe. I never knew what love is till I met you in the woods that day. I know I was a beast before I met you, but it's different now, and I—I fancied you might come to like me. Now if you hate me, and will never marry me, I might as well be dead."

Alice, listening with amazement near to terror, here gasped out :

"Jerry, dear, don't talk like that. . . . Marry you? I? I'm such a fool, and ugly, and un-gainly!"

"You're divine!"

"Oh, hush! Do please be quiet, or you'll make me cry. I'd given up all that. You didn't know.

And now you break down all my resolutions and make me—oh, so proud ! Oh, Jerry, don't !” Her voice died in a long-drawn sigh, which broke in tears.

“ Then you don't hate me ?” whispered Jerry hoarsely.

“ My dear, I should have loved you always if I'd dared to think. Now please let's talk like ordinary people. Let's walk along the meadows. I can't go in like this ; my eyes tell tales.” Jerry stayed to luncheon at the farm, and afterwards went up with Alice to the sacred woods.

“ I'm going to tell your father,” he informed her. “ I shall stay till he comes in to-night and get it over. I dare say he'll be angry ; so will mine at first.”

“ Your people are so grand, they terrify me !” Alice confessed. “ We shall be simple, shan't we ? and not proud at all, and have no dignity to take offence at little things ; and keep apart from politics and feel neighbourly to everyone. Then, if things go down, as father says, and all we have is taken from us by the Government, we shouldn't worry ; we should still be happy as poor people ?”

“ Rather a tall order !” chuckled Jerry ; “ but we can but try.”

“ Let me tell father,” pleaded Alice softly, as they drew near home, and he consented readily, with some relief. Having shown him to the parlour, where her aunt sat knitting, she disappeared till tea was ready, when she took a chair beside him and contrived to whisper :

“ He's kind but rather worried—says you're a

great catch, and that people are sure to say he angled for you. As if we'd thought of him or money or position once to-day! I think he'll ask for time to think about it."

"I can wait," said Jerry.

Her father spoke no word to either of them till the meal was over, when he said to Jerry: "Come with me a minute." His brow was deeply furrowed by perplexity.

He led the way into a small room furnished like an office, having piles of tradesmen's catalogues upon a bookshelf, and portraits of prize cattle on the walls. "Sit down," he said when he had closed the door behind them. Taking a seat himself, he spoke as follows:

"Well, my boy, Alice has told me the great secret, and I'm glad, because, in my opinion, she's the finest girl alive, and I was afraid that no one but myself would see it, owing to her tomboy ways. That's to begin with; and if only us three people were concerned, there'd be no more for me to say, you'd have my blessing. But there's your father. He and I are cousins, that's the fact; but he's the county gentleman and I'm a farmer. He don't cotton to me, and he's lately got some notion in his head which makes him downright hate me, I believe. Now you're the heir to all your father's landed property, and I know pretty well what that amounts to. Hating me, he's sure to say that Alice set her cap at you, and her aunt and I enticed you to the house, and if I sanctioned the engagement or seemed keen on it, he'd say I did that just to spite him; do you see? So now what I say is,

you ask your father. If he consents, I won't stand in the way. You're noways independent, so I can't deal straight with you ; and Alice won't come into anything till I depart. So we won't have an engagement, if you please. It's a matter of pride, you see, on her account ; and you'll give up coming here until your father knows the nature of your visits and approves of them. You're both mere babes, and can afford to wait. In time, if you don't change your minds, I may think differently ; but, for the present, that's my verdict : keep away ! Your father must give his consent before I give mine."

" Perhaps you're right," said Jerry, downcast.

" Of course I am. Now come and talk to Alice."

The farmer led his victim to the parlour, where Alice sat alone expecting him. " He's had his licking," he remarked ere leaving them.

" Don't look so sad," said Alice, grasping Jerry's hands. " You're only forbidden the house. We can meet out of doors. I told him we would not be kept apart."

" I don't see how my father can object," said Jerry fiercely.

Arrived at the Grange that evening, he went straight up to his mother's bedroom. She was resting in a lazy chair, preparatory to the effort of attiring. Kneeling down, he flung his arms about her, and poured out his story. His evident emotion made her weep from sympathy.

" I'm so thankful, Jerry ; she's a girl I've always liked. I find her charming in a funny way ; one likes to watch her. And I'm glad to think you've

chosen such a modest girl, instead of one who sets out to attract. It's true your father dislikes Mr. Vasey ; but I'm nearly certain it will be all right. He will be relieved to know you are attached to someone nice. He suspects you of revolting conduct, quite unjustly."

" Am I utterly dependent on him ?" Jerry asked.

" What an odd question ! . . . Yes, to all intents and purposes. There's some money in my marriage settlement that's bound to come to you eventually, but it wouldn't be more than a hundred a year. Why do you ask ?"

" I meant in case he disinherited me."

At that word Mrs. Harraby Vasey clutched him to her bosom and cried out : " Don't be so silly, child ! He couldn't ! You have done no wrong. Believe me, it will be all right. I'll watch my opportunity to tell your father."

Jerry conceived his father's smile already won.

XXXV

BUT by this time Mr. Harraby Vasey's anger with his cousin Robert was a sturdy plant, having been fed and watered gladly by facetious persons who saw in it the finest joke imaginable.

The little town of Nornham, with its air of sleepy innocence, its population always just over two thousand, the limit above which the public houses may keep open till eleven o'clock at night, had a mischievous and knowing spirit to be feared. The centre of a large agricultural district, it supplied the news and gossip to a score of villages, and plumed itself upon a love of fun—that is, of scandal.

When Mr. Harraby Vasey confided his suspicion to the draper Wellingham, his staunch supporter and a light of Nonconformity, he made so sure that it would go no further that he never thought of that slight indiscretion when he heard the same suspicion from the lips of others. Those others, as churchpeople and Conservatives, being divided by abysses from his confidant, must, he considered, speak from private knowledge.

But there exists a solidarity among old country neighbours apart from party feeling and religious difference. They have always local pride in common, and a joke against a stranger makes them one.

"Well, there, I never did!" all sorts agreed. "Bob Vasey! The bluntest, honourablest man that ever breathed! The poor old dear must be right off his nut to go and fancy such a thing!"

The joke convulsed the parlours of the various inns, and found its way to depths and summits of the population. The rector and four doctors, three solicitors, the brewer, and two maltsters—all the gentry of the town were charmed with it. Ever since Mr. Harraby Vasey's self-deceived denunciation of them at the garden fête, these great ones viewed him as fair game for any hoax; and his impudence in putting up for Parliament, when all the county had agreed to leave that game to the professionals, demanded chastisement. So, whenever he was thrown among them through the winter, they made fun of him, harping on Robert's journalistic powers.

"I am so sorry for you," said the white-haired rector, sitting beside him at a dance one evening in the public hall. "One can't help laughing—such a clamour about nothing—and you are right to treat it with contempt; but it was too bad of Mr. Robert Vasey if he really did it. Though a certain licence is allowed in politics, I really think that that was going much too far."

"He's got a pal in London, name of Caulker—on some paper," remarked a sporting lawyer on the victim's other hand. "And he himself's a pretty writer. Did you see those notes on 'Mildew' in the *Fortnightly*?"

Mr. Harraby Vasey saw they jested at the moment, but none the less did he believe them

cognizant of Robert's guilt. He forced a smile as usual.

"You keep your temper splendidly," the Liberal agent told him; "and you'll do all right, I'm sure. There's loads of time. The election won't come on for three years yet. Just keep your pecker up, and you'll be carried shoulder high."

Though glad to know his acting was effective, Mr. Harraby Vasey suffered none the less, and Robert was the cause of all his torments. Had the journalistic nuisance ceased, he might have rallied; but though the London Press had done with Larkmeadow for the present, the country papers, jackal-like, still tore the carcass; the villagers kept up their agitation; he dared not walk upon the heath for fear of insult, and, go where he would, he heard men saying that his cousin had a finger in all this. It became past bearing. Hailed by Robert at the railway-station one fine morning, when he himself was waiting for the London train, he eyed the scoundrel coldly, turned his back and walked away. It was this incident, happening the day before his talk with Jerry, which made the farmer shy of sanctioning his daughter's love affair.

After two days in London Mr. Harraby Vasey returned home refreshed, and strong in the resolve to break off intercourse with his tormentors.

His manner was so genial on arrival that his wife esteemed it a propitious moment to tell Jerry's news. With pardonable craft she mentioned first a matter she was sure would please him—the tenderness of Beryl for young Tavan.

"Mind, I know nothing. These are just my

observations ; but I shouldn't be surprised to hear it any day. For my part I shall always miss dear Alfred ; he was so attentive and amusing. Eric isn't."

"No eyes except for Beryl ; yes, I've noticed that," responded Mr. Harraby Vasey, deeply interested. "Well, I'm glad she has at last found someone quite desirable."

His satisfaction was apparent. Seeing it, his wife pursued :

"There's another piece of news I think will please you. Jerry also has found someone quite desirable."

"One of the Tavan girls ?" he questioned eagerly.

"No, you'll never guess," Mrs. Harraby Vasey's voice began to tremble. "A girl I always liked, but never thought of for him—a really nice girl, genuine and unaffected. You'll never guess unless I tell you—Alice Vasey !"

If his wife had suddenly picked up her chair and hit him on the head with it, Mr. Harraby Vasey could have shown no greater stupefaction than he did on this announcement. He saw the enemy invading his own hearth.

"That boy again !" he cried. "I'm really tired ! How long has this new game been going on ?"

"Jerry told me yesterday evening."

"And I suppose the joyful news has been announced to all the county ?"

"Of course not. Your consent is wanted."

Putting strong constraint upon himself, Mr. Harraby Vasey crossed the hall and rang a bell. "Where is the precious lamb at present ?" he inquired.

"Upstairs, I fancy."

"Then I'll see him in the study now, and get it over."

"Don't be angry, Richard!"

"Pshaw! my dear, I never was cooler in my life! But it's high time I put a stop to all this nonsense."

Jerry, summoned by Grain, descended to the study where his father sat and drummed upon the desk, awaiting him. A seeming pleasant smile deceived him at the first.

"Well, young man," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, his face within the shadow of the reading-lamp, eyeing his son ironically, while he dallied with his pince-nez; "so your mother tells me you are 'friends' with yet another charming damsel of the neighbourhood—just when we were beginning to recover from the shock your 'friendship' for the fair Miss Ditcher gave us. I can't have this, you know; it's getting scandalous."

"I don't know what you mean," said Jerry, flushing. "I am engaged to be married to my cousin Alice."

"Marry . . . your cousin. . . . Yah, yah, yah!" Mr. Harraby Vasey's scorn resembled madness. "You cannot marry without my consent; and I won't have it. This girl may be your cousin; she is not your equal. Her father has his ends in view, no doubt; he is my enemy. Marry that, indeed!—that maypole!—that great, long-legged, staring hoyden!"

Jerry smiled because his father's words, though spiteful, hit off Alice in a comical extreme of shyness.

"What, laughing, are you? You won't laugh if I disinherit you; it's in my power, remember!"

"I only wish you would!" replied his son with energy.

"Then I suppose you think you'd marry. A mistake. It's your position, not your manly charms they're after. I don't wish to be hard on you, Gerald; I make allowance for your inexperience. Only I must command you to have done with that young woman and her people. You must promise that."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Then I shall have to send you right away."

"I shan't go unless you put me in the way of earning my own living."

Mr. Harraby Vasey stared in horror at his offspring. He had grown so used in these last months to browbeat Jerry with impunity that his mind could hardly credit the defiance which his ears reported. His tone changed.

"Come, be a man!" he murmured gently. "You're behaving like a naughty little boy who wants well whipping."

"You daren't do it!" muttered Jerry, quite enraged.

"Now, not another word, you know my wishes. I won't be hard on you; but you must stop this folly. I am older than you are, and I know the world. This girl and her father want your money and position."

"They never think of things like that; they're not such snobs as you are."

"Jerry, I'm ashamed of you! You're not your-

self ! Go now, and think things over ; you will see I'm right. I have only spoken for your good, and you will live to thank me."

" Say what you like," said Jerry, as he left the room ; " I simply do not recognize your jurisdiction."

Mr. Harraby Vasey sank back in his chair exhausted, cursing the necessity for such disturbing scenes.

XXXVI

JERRY, in a white rage, went and told his mother what had happened. She wept at his report.

"Your father's overwrought with all this worry in the village," she declared. "He can't mean half he said. It's all my fault for speaking when I did ; but he seemed quite good-tempered. You mustn't be so bitter, Jerry ; I ought not to listen. He has a right, you know, to ask you to do nothing hasty."

"That isn't it at all !" said Jerry fiercely. "He commanded me to give up Alice ; there he has no right. We always meant to wait. That's not the question——"

"Perhaps he has some reasons which we do not know."

"If he has, they're purely selfish and irrational——"

"You must not talk like that !"

"Don't worry, mother ; it's not worth it. I promise you I won't fly out again. I shall simply take no notice, since he's so unfair."

The unfairness was what chiefly rankled in his mind, for he had always looked upon his father as the soul of justice, and in that faith had borne long months of discipline which now began to seem like senseless tyranny. Had his father always been

unjust ? Then he had never known him till this evening ; he had served a stranger.

Having told his mother all there was to tell, he left the house. A walk through wet lanes, in a darkness rendered mournful by slow-falling rain, did not amend his plight. At eight o'clock he knocked at Mr. Catchpole's door, the lights in other cottages appearing watchful of him.

"Come in ! Why, what's the matter ?" cried the ex-policeman. Your coat's all wet ; wherever have you been ? Set down and get your breath, and then you tell me."

He went and closed the door into the backhouse where his wife and Katey were preparing supper at that minute, and then heard Jerry's story to an end.

"Well, that's a good un, that is !" he exclaimed, slapping his knee. "The young lady is his own relation, ain't she ? And her father, Mr. Robert Vasey, is a man respected. What can he ha' gone and got into his head ? You may depend upon it, that's just worry ; what with politics, as 'd craze anybody excepting a born sharp ; and this bit o' heath as they've begun again to fuss about. There's a bit in the *Flame* this morning, Rush was telling me. Something outside had riled him, that you may depend ; but he'll come round in time, and feel ashamed. . . . We mustn't let this get about the village, or they'll go against your father 'angrier on your account. . . . You've missed your dinner there at home, I guess, so stop and have a bite along of us. That's just on ready."

During supper Mr. Catchpole spoke to the same

purpose, and his womenfolk vied with him to raise Jerry's spirits.

"I'm sure I'm not surprised your father ain't himself," his wife declared; "the way the people here do treat him. Something cruel! I thought that silliness was done with when they got the Dodman, but all them meddling newspapers ha' made it worse; and they've begun again, they tell me. There's a young chap staying at the George in Nornham, comes up to the Chequers here and eggs 'em on. They had a procession, as they call it, last Sunday, and they say they'll keep on at it till they break his pride."

"In his place, I'd go right away," said Mr. Catchpole, "and leave some local, well-known man in charge. That heath'd be enclosed within a year."

"That's gone too far, I think," said Katey sagely; "but I want to see you look more hopeful, Mr. Jerry."

"The world ha'n't come to an end, not yet!" chuckled her father.

Jerry went home at half-past nine. Meeting Grain in the hall, he asked him to give word that he had come in tired and gone straight to bed. Alone in his bedroom, he forgot all good advice; remembered nothing but his father's insults. The whole house seemed strange to him. His mother? Yes, his mother was the same, but she had preached submission, was too weak to take his part. That his father meant by every means to cut him off from Alice he had no doubt, as he recalled the interview. To save his happiness he must, therefore, hit at once upon a counter-stroke, the more

decisive, the more violent, the better. All night he sat up pondering expedients, saddened by the image of himself in darkness gazing after a receding light. At dawn he stole out by the garden door. His object was to see if a romantic project he had formed would bear the ordeal of fresh air and daylight. It had stopped raining. In the east there glowed a saffron sky through bars of inky cloud. The fir-tree tops seemed carved out of night itself, and, agitated by a wind, resembled nodding heads. Upon the heath the gorse and bents were grey with dew. The fairy veil of gossamer spread over them was set with tiny pearls. The wakening notes of birds resounded sadly. He felt as one about to take a plunge to unknown depths ; but in a minute, when the sun rose, and the birds sang out exultant, he felt more like a winged creature bent on flight. He remembered Ethel's saying : " If you ever fall in love with a nice girl, you can command me ; I will help you against everyone." It was like a hand held out to him.

Going home to breakfast, he behaved as usual, but at ten o'clock went out again, without inquiring if his father needed him. There was a spot in Jelwick Wood, the junction of three grassy paths, which he and Alice had established as their trysting-place. She had promised to be there at noon to-day, in case his father might not have returned from London. He was very early at the place, and had to kick his heels an hour before she came.

" What is the matter ?" she inquired immediately, causing him to marvel at her penetration.

"Nothing very dreadful! I want you to marry me at once!"

"Has your father given his consent, then?" She looked scared.

"No, just the opposite. I've had a scene." He described it delicately. "And when your father hears about it, he'll be wild, and forbid you to have any more to do with me."

They stood together, frowning at the horrid prospect. Both felt that desperate measures were required.

"Now here's my plan," said Jerry with some hesitation. "I shall take you to my cousin Ethel, who will help, I know. Then I must find out all about a special licence; and when we're married we shall come back home again, and go on just the same, only we shall tell our people, and put a stop to all idea of separation. Then, if my father takes it badly, I shall get the mater to give me enough money to clear off to Canada, where I have two married sisters who could help me at the start. After a year or two you could come out and join me. It's all vague as yet. The thing is, can you anyhow get away for a couple of days? Our business oughtn't to take longer. Can you?" questioned Jerry earnestly, adding, upon reflection, "How about to-morrow?"

"Father goes off to Norwich early—there's a show or something—and will stay the night. The very thing! I'm game!" said Alice gaily. In her eyes appeared the sparkle which had welcomed onslaughts on old Burridge and every other piece of mischief, when she served her brothers.

"Then that's all right. I'll start from Nornham by the eight o'clock ; you join that train at Teddis-hall. I'll see to everything."

"I daren't take any luggage. Oh, what fun !" she cried.

Jerry's first thought on reaching home was money. Directly after lunch he took account of his resources. His allowance had been stopped as part of his disgrace ; but his mother made him gifts from time to time, and these he had laid by, for the most part, having few expenses. His savings reached a sum of nearly fifty pounds. Finding a cheque among his assets, he rushed off to Nornham, arriving just in time to cash it before the bank doors closed at four o'clock. Returning, he encountered Mr. Catchpole—the very man he wanted—and reversed his course. Beginning with talk of the City of London and its antiquities—a theme beloved of the ex-policeman—Jerry went on to Dickens—of whom his hearer was a staunch disciple—to David Copperfield, and so to Doctors Commons. Did Doctors Commons still exist, or was the whole thing done away with ? His unsuspecting friend explained it all to him, describing the locality, and all the turnings to be taken whether you went there from Blackfriars or the Mansion House or Ludgate Hill, telling much more than Jerry wished to know. By that time he was back in the High Street at Nornham, and Mr. Catchpole had pulled up beneath a barber's pole.

"I'm going in to get my monthly crop !" said he, and entered to portentous tinkling of a little bell.

Jerry walked back again to Larkmeadow. He told his mother that he wanted to escape for a day or two from the unpleasant atmosphere in order to regain his equilibrium, and begged her not to tell his father, who would very likely try to stop his going.

XXXVII

BEFORE half-past seven next morning, Mr. Catchpole, returning from a farm upon the Nornham road, whither he had been sent by his wife to fetch a dozen eggs, met Jerry carrying a heavy Gladstone bag.

"Well, young man, what may you be doing up so early; and where may you be off to?" he exclaimed.

"London for a day or two," said Jerry, blushing hotly. "I need a change."

"And what are you a-lugging that for?" pointing to the bag. "I suppose you ha'n't got servants enough up at yours, nor yet a cart nor nothing. That's much too heavy for you. Just you wait a minute, and I'll fetch a chap to carry it."

"I can't wait. I can manage quite well, really. I'm rather late. Good-bye!"

Mr. Catchpole pulled out his watch, and chuckled scornfully. "Why, you've got more than half an hour. That's loads o' time. Just you wait there till I can empty these here eggs out o' my side-pockets into some safe place, and I'll walk with you myself and carry that."

"No, thanks!" called Jerry, who had hurried on.

Mr. Catchpole pushed aside his hat and scratched his head as he stared after him.

"Now what made you go red like that, young man?" he meditated; "and tell a story, too—for if he's going for the eight o'clock he's fully early. And why didn't he never mention when we was all that time together yesterday, as he was going up to town to-day? He's up to something. I must think and think."

"Why, what a fool I am, to be sure!" he exclaimed half an hour later, to the astonishment of his wife and daughter, who were busy in the back-house, where he sat apparently absorbed in an old newspaper. "Well, to think he've gone and done me brown like this! And that artful! All on Dickens and old Doctors Commons. Done a treat, I am! Well, he've got that train; but I must have a try still. Katey, fetch that sovereign from the dressing table right-hand drawer."

"Well, of all the men alive!" cried Mrs. Catchpole, lifting hands to heaven. "Why, stoopid, can't you tell us what's the matter? What ha' took you sudden?"

"It's young Jerry trying to get married on the sly," he chuckled. "I must stop that somehow."

"Do let them alone, father," Katey pleaded. "I'm sure you couldn't find a nicer couple."

But the policeman was now uppermost in Mr. Catchpole. Jerry's artfulness had roused his hunting instinct, as sudden movement of a hare sets off a greyhound. Although his purpose was entirely benignant, he would not have forgone the chase for anything.

"That ain't the way for him, nor yet for her," he told his daughter. "They won't be happy going off like that, impulsive. And that'd about finish our old partner at the Grange, coming atop of all his other troubles. Fetch my best hat, Katey, and that sovereign, and I'm off."

When Mr. Catchpole got to Nornham Station, a down train was in, and he caught sight of Mr. Robert Vasey on the point of entering a third-class carriage. After a debate, which did not occupy his mind a second, he made haste and stopped him. It might seem mean to Jerry, but he (Edgar Catchpole) had a daughter of his own ; he also knew that Robert Vasey was a man of sense.

"What's the row ?" inquired the farmer.

Mr. Catchpole briefly outlined his suspicions, with the result that Robert Vasey let the train depart without him.

"Is my daughter with him ?"

"I can't say for sure, sir ; but I guess she is by this time, judging from his hopeful looks. I expect he stuck his head out when he got to Teddishall. You see, poor Jerry's had a kick-up with his father, and this seems to him the only way to make things certain."

"A pretty way ! Without a word to me. Abducting my daughter ! I must send a wire to Norwich and then drive straight home. It may mean a serious loss to me, if I miss the particular stock that I was going to buy ; but, happily, it's my private business, not his lordship's, or I couldn't throw it over. Mark you, Catchpole, if I find it's all a scare of your imagination, like your parish council fancies, I shall knock you down !"

"Welcome, sir, any time," said Mr. Catchpole, squaring up and chuckling.

"Well, if she's not at home I'll catch the twelve fifteen from Teddishall at latest ; but it's all no good, for I haven't a notion where to find her there in London."

"Well, sir, you might do worse than try Miss Harraby's. Jerry's as thick as thieves with her, or once was ; and she strikes me as the kind of lady game for anything. I shouldn't wonder if he took Miss Alice there. It's Campden Mansions, Kensington ; you'd soon find out the number." Robert Vasey made a memorandum in his pocket-book. "But there's one thing I do beg, sir : that you won't consult our Mr. Harraby Vasey. That ain't fair to Jerry."

"As soon consult an alligator in a fit !" scoffed Farmer Robert.

"And there's another thing I wish to say before we part. Don't you go fancying there's any harm in Jerry."

"Eh ? What's all this, then ? Harm enough, I think."

"I mean he done it all with a good heart. He've been sticking up for you and yours at home good tidily. You take my word for that—I know him ; he don't mean no harm."

Robert Vasey eyed the speaker coolly up and down, ejaculated "Umph !" and strode out, frowning, through the booking-office.

XXXVIII

“ AM coming to claim your promise. Needing help. Be with you one o’clock.—JERRY.”

Ethel received her cousin’s telegram in bed, at the moment when, having finished two slices of buttered toast and a cup of tea, which was all she ever took by way of breakfast, she was lazily contemplating the necessity of getting up. Her mind made light of it. She was used to having weight attached by men to her polite remarks. Her promise? Had she ever promised anything; and, if so, what? It could be nothing serious. Most likely he was in the pangs of some new scrape, and needed comforting. She had encouraged him to have recourse to her in difficulties; but, though in the country she might find his youthful sins amusing, it was otherwise in London, where she could command mature adorers. Surprise visits were unwelcome to her always, and it was annoying that Jerry should have hit upon a day which Mr. Bredbane had already booked. There was no help for it, however; she must seem to welcome him, and trust to fate and her own mother-wit to get rid of him directly after lunch.

Accepting her bad luck, she dressed to charm him, and afterwards went out and bought fresh flowers to deck her rooms. That done, she grew

impatient for his coming, and gave a sigh of satisfaction when at last she heard the bell. Rushing out into the little hall, she found a girl with him.

"Well, Ethel, here we are! You'll help us, won't you? You'll put Alice up?"

"Oh, dear Miss Harraby, you don't mind, do you?"

Her hand was grasped by Jerry. Alice hugged her. The nature of the visit was so stupefying that it robbed her for the moment of the power to think. Instinctively she dragged the pair into the drawing-room and shut the door.

"Now, do please tell me what it's all about!" she cried, the sweetest picture of distraction.

Alice shrugged in desperation, and subsided on a chair, leaving the task to Jerry, who explained:

"You know, of course, that we're engaged." She had not known, but made no protest, pending further revelations. "Well, for some unknown reason, dad won't hear of it. He took a tone I couldn't stand, and swore to separate us, so we're going to get married privately, to make all sure. You promised that you'd back me up through thick and thin when I was really in earnest; so I wired. We got to Liverpool Street about eleven, bought some night things and a dressing-case for Alice, who had nothing with her, and gradually mooched up here."

Much more was added to the same effect, but Ethel scarcely listened; while her features expressed perfect sympathy, her mind was frowning. In the past she had led Jerry to believe she was romantic, so had herself to blame for this

emergency. But an elopement—secret marriage—two such children—— It was inconceivable. She had to look all round her to be sure she was not dreaming. Jerry's coolness in expecting her to back him in such madness, and embroil herself for ever with her aunt and uncle, quite enraged her. She could have killed him at the moment for his blind fatuity. Yet she feared to destroy his confidence in her, her only weapon. It was necessary to temporize until she saw the chance for tender and benign discouragement.

"Well, let's have lunch," she voted with an airy laugh. "You must be famished. We must talk this over soberly and philosophically."

"You are a brick, Ethel! I knew you'd help us. Alice may stop here, mayn't she?"

"As long as she likes. I'm very pleased to have her; but there's still a lot that we must think about. I don't believe one word of it at present, and regard you both as ghostly apparitions. You must recollect that till this minute I had no idea that you and she were even friends."

"Alice'll tell you all about it, Ethel. I must see to business. Can't stop to lunch, thanks, though I'll come back to tea, if you'll let me. I think I shall book a bedroom at the Liverpool Street Hotel."

Ethel, guessing his mad errand, let him go. His departure eased her mind of more than half its burden, for Alice, without him, would be fairly easy to manipulate. The case appeared to her of such importance that she resolved to give up all her own intrigues till it was settled, and this re-

luctant self-denial made her cross. Jerry gone, she sat in thoughtful silence at the luncheon table, while she gathered up the reins of judgment. Alice, too, was silent, conscious of a sudden chill.

"Is there any truth in this mad story?" Ethel asked at length with sorrowing looks, and Alice felt the first breath of calamity.

"But Jerry told you——" she began pathetically.

Ethel snapped, "Oh, don't let's talk of Jerry!" She added in her dulcet tone: "Of course, he's mad, and you're the cause of it. You needn't blush. Has no one ever told you that you have bewitching eyes?" Ethel knew the value of a touch of flattery. "Jerry's past all reason. Let us talk of you. Have you really given serious thought to what you're doing?"

Alice faltered: "Jerry wished it, so I came."

"Always Jerry! Much as I like him, he is not incarnate wisdom, nor should I ever take his will as divine law."

"It is for me," said Alice, with a flush which beautified her.

Ethel, artistically moved, took the child's hand and stroked it, saying: "You are sweet; but have you never thought that men in love are—how shall I put it?—not quite normal, not quite sober, and that it is our duty to look after them and see that they do nothing rash? Don't you see what the end of these high jinks will be? Simply that Jerry's father will disinherit him."

"We've thought of that. He doesn't mind a bit," said Alice eagerly.

"Of course he doesn't, being off his head; but

can you imagine him in poverty ? The fact is, you have neither of you known the want of money, and so you trust in Providence like babies ; you can't believe that you will ever really want. Shall I tell you what will happen necessarily ? Jerry will feel the lack of comfort and regret the quarrel with his father, which might have been avoided with a little patience. He will see in you the cause of all the trouble with his people, and, in cross moments, count the cost of having you—a thing you would not like him to have need to do, now, would you ?”

“ Oh, what am I to do ? Oh, do advise me, dear Miss Harraby !” Alice was quite annihilated by the dismal forecast. “ It seemed so easy ; now it's all so difficult.”

“ Do you really wish me to advise you ?”

“ Please, please, do !”

“ Then drink that glass of wine, and let me take you back to Cloverfield. I'll be ready in two minutes.”

This was inspiration. Not till she had made the offer to take Alice home did Ethel see the whole advantage of the proposition. Not only would she thus acquit herself honourably of a great responsibility, but also she escaped an explanation with that frantic boy.

“ But oh, I can't ! Poor Jerry !” Alice moaned.

“ It's all for his good, to save him from doing something he would all his life regret. He will see the sense of it if you put it to him as your own thought, and love you all the better ; though he'd bite my head off if I dared suggest it. You have such power, you see ! . . . It's not a great thing,

really. You will be as happy as before. You're both so young, you can afford to wait."

"We always meant to wait a long, long while," said Alice earnestly. "We only wanted to make sure of one another."

"That looks as if you doubted one another! Or else Jerry proposed this outing just to spite his father, which I think a very foolish, rather wicked motive."

"His father was wicked. He spoke horribly. Jerry believes that he will stop at nothing——"

"Jerry has been reading novels till they've turned his brain. His father has been worried lately, and is irritable; but he couldn't play the villain if he tried. All Jerry's wild alarms, my dear, are merely symptoms of the fairy madness that I spoke of—the great excitement of his love for you. . . . You will come, won't you? I'll be ready in a minute."

"If you're sure it's right." Alice had all that she could do to keep from tears. "I feel so mean. Oh, can't we wait till Jerry comes, and tell him everything?"

"I think not. It would only make a scene. When he's had time to think it over he'll be grateful to you. I'll leave a note for him."

Going to her writing-table in the drawing-room, Ethel took a thick, smooth sheet of paper, very faintly scented and embellished with her monogram, and wrote on it: "Am taking the other baby home." Having written this, she paused, and sucked her pen-holder. Her desire was to write something healing, but her brain was uninspired, and time was

passing. She therefore, with a sigh, took refuge in the ancient formula : " You will live to thank me for it." Then she hastened to her bedroom.

While she was putting on her hat before the pier glass, the front door bell rang, and she feared that it was Jerry ; but the maid relieved her apprehension instantly, announcing :

" Mr. Bredbane ! You said, miss, that you weren't at home to anyone, so I've kept him waiting till I asked you."

Ethel went to him at once, and told him of her worries in a hurried whisper. He grinned amazement, then indulged in silent whistles. " I'm taking the girl back home. We must get off before my cousin comes. Go in and talk to her, there's a good man ; you've met her down at Larkmeadow. Keep her from breaking down, for mercy's sake ! I could not stand a tearstained country wench. To have to go at all is bad enough."

" Then our evening's entertainment is quite off ?"

" I'm awfully sorry ; but you see exactly how I'm placed ?"

She finished her attire in haste and then went back to the drawing-room, where she found Alice on the sofa in a love-lorn posture, trying to second Bredbane's efforts to make conversation, while blinking hard to keep her tears from falling.

" Come along, Alice, I'm quite ready. I suppose you know you'll have to put me up to-night at Cloverfield ?"

Alice shook hands with Bredbane, meeting his gaze a thought defiantly, then turned to Ethel with a little pout.

“ I rather like your tear-stained country wench,” was Bredbane’s whisper, as Ethel passed out second of the two.

“ Oh, she’s a dear !” was the reply ; “ but only think ! To bring her here to me on such an errand ! As if I wished to anger my most useful relatives !” She positively scowled at the enormity. “ You stop here, Alfred, till we’ve got away. She’d rather be alone with me, I know.”

Alfred was lost in admiration of her subtle wisdom of the serpent ; the animal instinct of self-preservation subtilized till it appeared divine ; while Ethel, as she started off, caressing Alice, was debating whether she should not go on to Larkmeadow and take the credit of her intervention in this mad affair.

XXXIX

IN the meanwhile, Jerry had made his way by the underground railway to Blackfriars, and thence, following the directions gleaned from Mr. Catchpole, up Queen Victoria Street, till he marked St. Benet's Church upon his right below the level of the road ; when he took a turning to the left and saw before him up a gully a section of the wall of the cathedral, black below, light grey above. Half-way up this cross street at a second turning to the left, Knight-rider Street, he stopped to summon courage, and took stock of his surroundings. A notice-board upon the building opposite had : " Faculty of London, Doctors Commons. Marriage Licences, first door " in whitish letters on a black ground, and a hand pointing the direction. Knightrider Street was spanned high up by a Bridge of Sighs connecting two great warehouses, at one of which a van was being loaded. Business men were hurrying back from lunch by ones and twos. He was ready to go forward when a tall, broad-shouldered individual, who had been talking to a policeman at the opposite corner, turned and came towards him. Jerry could not believe his eyes. He stared and stared again, trying hard not to show the annoyance which he really felt.

"I want a little talk with you, young man," said Mr. Catchpole.

"All right, in a minute. I'll be back directly." Jerry was for going on, but Mr. Catchpole caught his arm.

"No, no, you don't! Not yet!"

"I say, this is more than a joke!" cried Jerry, getting red.

"Don't you go shouting—do I'll give you into custody," laughed Mr. Catchpole. "That there bobby's an old friend of mine, and everyone round here'll side with me. This is my native village, same as Larkmedder."

There was a constant stream of men past the scene of this altercation. Several of them turned to stare at the queer couple, the young man flushed and angry, the elder, evidently a policeman in plain clothes, calmly chuckling. Mr. Catchpole touched his hat to one of them with a grin of recognition, which was returned.

"Now I know well enough what you are here for. I was a fool not to see your game yesterday, time you asked me all them questions about Dickens and David Copperfield, so artful! And I'm here to prevent it if I can. I can't stop you, I ha'n't got the right; but I want you just to take a turn with me around these buildings and hear what I can tell you. After that, if you choose to go on just the same . . . well, I shall be disappointed in you, and that's all about it."

Jerry consenting, though with ill grace, he pursued:

"It's about your father. His health ain't what

it was ; he's wholly worried. They say he broke down in his speech the other night at the banquet of the Nornham Oddfellows—lost his memory like, and stammered as it was a pain to see. There's no doubt but what he's feeling poorly. He ain't the kind of gentleman can stand a laugh against him, not for long. You haven't been no help at all to him, being so took up with your own affairs. He need you, that's my feeling ; he wouldn't own it, but he need you all the same. He looked after you, didn't he, when you was a little chap ? Well, now he's queer and shaky, it's your turn to look after him, and bear with all he say and do, no matter what. That's how I see it. And I'm sure if you did anything on purpose for to rile him now, that'd be a shame, and you'd be sorry afterwards. I did think you was more of a sportsman, Mr. Jerry. Look after him and get him well again, then take and fight him : that's the Christian way. . . . That's all I've got to say. It ain't a great deal. Now you can do what you was going to do when I first met you. I reckon I'll look up a friend or two since here I be."

And Mr. Catchpole strode off briskly without giving his young friend a chance to reply.

Jerry wandered out into St. Paul's churchyard and entered the Cathedral in his need of quiet. There he sat down and faced his disconcertion, while the muffled roar of traffic left behind was present round the stillness like a wall of sound. Mr. Catchpole's prompt withdrawal had enforced his arguments much as the dagger finishes the sabre's work. By dint of wrangling Jerry might have kept

some self-respect ; deprived of it he felt unfit to be alive. It had never before occurred to him that his father might be weak. As was natural to a youth brought up in reverence, he had thought his elder's every word the fruit of judgment. He had a sense of growing very fast, his view of life extended with such sudden leaps.

But how could he tell Alice of his change of mind ? He would have to confess that he had brought her up to London all for nothing ; that the excitement he had made her share was wicked madness, for so it appeared to him in the light of Mr. Catchpole's reasoning. He realized how much of spite had gone to the elopement.

Gradually the calm of the great church took hold of him. Though people came and went continually, and footfalls on its pavements never ceased, the calm endured. It seemed the quiet heart of London—of the English race. As he thought upon the struggle going on outside, the beauty and the need of calm appeared to him, with other things conducive to salvation. There was a race once famed for love of duty, for devotion and self-sacrifice ; and here was he, an Englishman of the English, an East Anglian, resting in Paul's Church in London town, the sanctuary of that race, surrounded by the trophies of its old renown, in an agony because he feared to let his sweetheart know that he had been an ass. The vanity, the smallness of it, was too pitiful ; it made him laugh. He beheld a preposterous imp called " personal dignity," mouth-ing and strutting, posturing to empty air, and determined to have done with him for ever.

Alice should have his full confession, he decided manfully. Ethel would support him at the first announcement ; she must have thought him absolutely mad ; and on the journey home, alone with Alice, he could make a clean breast of his folly. The wish to abdicate perfection in her eyes marked another of those leaps in growth which startled him. A bell was ringing for evensong ; the distant chancel lamps were being lighted when he left the church.

For time still further to arrange his thoughts, he walked as far as to the Temple Station. An hour later, running up the steps of Ethel's flat, unseeing, all his wits intent upon the task before him, he met a person coming down, who promptly collared him.

"Where's Alice?" this assailant asked in furious tones ; and Jerry felt his stature dwindling magically as he faced the righteous ire of Robert Vasey.

"At my cousin's flat," he faltered.

"No she's not! The maid informs me that Miss Harraby went out with a young lady half an hour ago, and couldn't say when she'd be back. You know nothing of that, I see." Jerry's face of disappointment was conclusive evidence. "That wasn't part of the scheme. Then perhaps you'll be good enough to come upstairs and find out where they've gone."

The farmer let go Jerry's collar, but the younger man still felt himself in custody.

Miss Harraby had not left word where she was going ; she had said that she would very likely be away all night ; but she had left a note for Mr. Gerald, the maid said, and brought it to him.

Standing out upon the landing, under Mr. Vasey's eyes, Jerry opened it, and read :

" Am taking the other baby home. You will live to thank me for it.—E.H."

" There, you can read it, sir," he shouted, thrusting the sheet of paper on his captor, who, after glancing at it, said :

" There's some sense somewhere."

Jerry felt as if he had lost Alice finally. The treachery of Ethel made him gnash his teeth. He was baulked of his confession, of his right to plead his cause with Alice ; he was robbed of all the pleasure of the journey home.

XL

ALL at once, as he stood brooding on his disappointment, he found her father was haranguing him in angry tones.

"I trusted you. I put you on your honour. She isn't yet nineteen, and still a child in some things. She's game for any prank—that's all she'd think it—and needs looking after. You and your people sneer at me for a rough farmer, but I can tell you that there's not a man I call my friend who would abuse a young girl's trust as you have done. That stamps you, sir. You knew that she'd do anything you asked her; and for that very cause a gentleman—we use that word, you see, as well as you do—would never have asked her to do anything. You know what I said about it—that I wouldn't let you marry her without your father's sanction—at any rate, till Alice was of age. And yet you go——"

But just at this point Jerry burst out laughing. The minute previous he had been upon the verge of tears. This deluge of misfortune consequent upon an honest impulse impressed him all at once as ludicrous.

"Don't hit too hard, sir, till you've heard my story," he exclaimed, as soon as painful merriment allowed of speech. "I really believed, when I set

out this morning, that I was doing the right thing all round. I had a row with my father the night before last." As he told the story of his father's outburst, with a touch of humour, the farmer's face relaxed a little of its sternness. "I was awfully indignant, as you can imagine, at the tone he took; and I really thought that the best way to show my contempt for his opinion of Alice was to marry her at once by special licence. There's no excuse for what he said, for you're his cousin; and the snob-bishness of it riled me good tidily, as they say at home. I didn't realize that he was out of sorts and worried. . . ."

The touch of dialect, even more than the good temper evident in this address, pleased Farmer Robert.

"So you thought you were defending Alice, did you?" he inquired, with but the merest reminiscence of his former fierceness. "That's my business, just at present, I would have you know. But it's time I was getting back to Liverpool Street, and you, too, I reckon. You can go on telling me as we go along." He looked at his watch in some anxiety. "My word! it's getting late. We'll take a cab."

Jerry ran downstairs ahead of him and bade the porter call a hansom.

"As quick as you can to Liverpool Street," said Mr. Vasey as he got in last.

"Any more to tell?" he questioned, sitting down abruptly as the horse sprang forward at a cut of the whip.

"Heaps," said Jerry, and proceeded to relate the

mysterious appearance of Mr. Catchpole in the neighbourhood of Doctors Commons.

"Thinks your father's ill, does he?" his companion muttered, with a thoughtful frown. "He's a good man, that Catchpole—got a head upon his shoulders. That idea of his about the parish council sounds like rubbish, but there's something in it; his lordship said so only yesterday. . . . Your father's ill? Well, that accounts for things. But why should he take such a mortal dislike to me?"

"He's awfully worried, sir; you mustn't mind. I don't suppose he meant a word of it." Jerry spoke already as his father's guardian.

Arriving at Liverpool Street, they found that the last train to Nornham had been gone five minutes. There was a later one to Ipswich, but no farther. The farmer voted that they stopped the night in London. While still debating, they were joined by Mr. Catchpole, who approached them, chuckling.

"There! I knew how that would be. My friends declared their clock was fast. There's one consolation—I've got company."

The arrival of the ex-policeman relieving him of need to talk, Jerry fell into a kind of stupor, feeling very giddy. The noises of the station deafened him, yet seemed remote; its many lights swam round him in a haze. Mr. Catchpole called the farmer's notice to him by a meaning nod.

"I bet he haven't had a bite since he left home this morning."

"Come, Jerry, we must have a glass of something after all these trials."

Robert Vasey took the young man's arm affec-

tionately, Mr. Catchpole keeping close to him upon the other side. They made him drink a little brandy at the buffet, which revived him.

"Now, where are we to pass the night?" inquired the farmer. "I know a place in Paternoster Square. We might do worse."

"That's for you, gentlemen," said Mr. Catchpole. "I must cut my coat according to my cloth."

"Come, Catchpole, this is my affair. Don't put on parts!"

Jerry, at last alive to their discussion, here doffed his hat and made a bow to both of them.

"I must insist upon your honouring me to-night, since it was on my business that you came to London."

"Well, if that ain't the masterpiece!" cried Mr. Catchpole.

"All right," said Robert Vasey. "What do you say? We mustn't grudge the boy his fair revenge!"

Jerry, to do things properly, insisted on a cab to Paternoster Square.

"Unless I'm much mistaken, that's the place where Nelly Ditcher's gone as barmaid—an old friend of yours, Mr. Jerry," said the ex-policeman.

"The girl there was the fuss about?" inquired the farmer, in a private whisper. "Anything in that?"

Mr. Catchpole deigned no answer but a strange grimace.

"A lot of silly fuss about next door to nothing," he observed three minutes later in the cab, surprising Jerry, who knew nothing of this by-play. "You shall judge for yourself presently."

Arrived at the hotel, he led the way into the private bar, where Nelly, as it chanced, was posing, a coquettish figure. Since leaving Larkmeadow, she had changed the tincture of her hair, adopting that peculiar honey-colour which attracts the drones. Her eyelashes and brows were now artistic touches. At sight of Jerry she forsook a group to which she had been posturing, and came to him with unaffected welcome.

"Good gracious, Mr. Jerry! Well, this is a pleasure! Are you stopping in the house? Why didn't you let me know beforehand you were coming? Then I'd have seen to it that they had something special. How are you? You aren't looking up to much."

"There's other old friends present," chuckled Mr. Catchpole.

When they went to dinner in the coffee-room, they found themselves the object of a strange obsequiousness. Jerry in particular was treated as some kind of potentate. Miss Ditcher had sent round the word that he was somebody.

All three were hungry, but Mr. Catchpole proved himself the master-trencherman. He called for more when he desired it, shamelessly, and put away a surprising variety of viands.

"That's only justice," he explained, "Mr. Jerry having nearly worried my old head off all to-day."

"Like to have a profession, would you?" said Farmer Robert, in reply to a remark of Jerry's. "There are only two that I could help you to, and one's no good. You aren't the build for farming. But the agent business might be worth your learning."

There are good jobs going, once you're qualified, and it'll come in useful if you ever step into your father's shoes. He owns a matter of two thousand acres here and there."

Jerry jumped at the offer, for its chance of independence, and the farmer said he could begin his studies when he chose. The ban against his going to the house was thus removed.

"I've quite changed my view of him," said Robert Vasey, when Jerry, in fulfilment of a promise to Miss Ditcher, had gone back into the bar for a few minutes. "Whatever made him go off mad like that?"

"He've got it very bad—the old complaint," said Mr. Catchpole. "I never see a feller quite so gone, and I've seen several."

"Thought it didn't take folks that way nowadays. I set it down to blackguardism," said the other.

When Jerry came again, the three repaired to the smoking-room, where Mr. Catchpole talked about his parish council, adumbrating strange developments, as that every village should have its own small army, available for home defence, and that Parliament should be reduced to an advising Board, as far as home affairs were concerned. He explained as best he could, in halting terms, that the unit of effective local government ought to be as small as possible, in order that every citizen might feel his personal responsibility towards the public. All meetings of the parish councils should be open to all comers, so that their doings might be kept above-board, and people might be taught to take a pride

in their efficiency. Many of the gentlefolks took pride already in their native places, and would, he thought, leave money to the councils for specific purposes. He foresaw a friendly competition between villages, working up a rate of progress never known before ; and all this was to be evolved quite naturally by the folk themselves, without the orders from headquarters, the sharp drilling, which is tyranny.

" You gentlemen know better than I do about history and all that," he told them ; " but I've read a bit, and I know we've all our time been getting rid of tyranny. We got rid o' the tyranny of the Lords, and we got rid o' the tyranny of the King, and now the next thing for us to do is to get rid of the tyranny of the Commons."

They sat and jeered at him till he despaired of their conversion ; when the farmer recollected a vast store of funny stories, which kept them all three laughing until after midnight. In bed at last, Jerry was conscious of a blush when he remembered that one of the convivial souls with whom he had but now made merry was Alice's father—a blush which made the thought of Alice shine more purely.

XLI

ON the afternoon when Jerry, in London, received such salutary buffets from the hand of fate, Mr. Harraby Vasey met a group of his supporters by appointment at the George Hotel in Nornham. The meeting occupied a private room, made gloomy by a superfluity of snuff-brown curtains, a carpet and a table-cloth of the same hue. The window seemed to have been closed for years. Mr. Harraby Vasey dared not open it, however, because his colleagues had remarked upon the cold. They were a group of unrefined and worthy beings, mostly bearded, of every figure from the energetic to the stout and jovial.

As soon as business was transacted, and each had given account of his own efforts for the cause, the candidate got up and paced the room. They expected a little genial talk before dispersing, and usually he shone on these occasions. But to-day he found a difficulty in starting topics, for he had not yet got over that distressing scene with Jerry.

"It's regular April weather," he remarked urbanely, and paused a moment at the window, looking out over a wire blind, apparently much interested in a passing tumbril, whose conductor, seated on the shaft, was whistling cheerily in defiance of a smart shower which was driving every-

one indoors along the street. When the rumble of its wheels grew faint, he turned again towards his friends, whose faces wore expectant smiles. They were silent only from politeness, deeming it his right to lead, and when the silence threatened to become embarrassing, they risked remarks.

"I see the *Flame's* begun again on Larkmedder," said a very corpulent and red-faced man, with eyes projecting on the edge of a retreating forehead. As he sat with arms and legs akimbo, he resembled a gigantic frog. "I hope that won't be like that was last summer-time."

"I have ceased to trouble," said Mr. Harraby Vasey coldly. "Let them say what they like. The only thing I mind is the rudeness I encounter from the labourers, which strikes me as ungrateful, after all I've done for them."

"That dew seem hard to bear," agreed a pale, black-bearded shopman. "But, bless you, that 'on't dew your cause no harm!"

"I know what will, though," said the frog-like individual, "and that's your letting people have you on about it. You'll excuse my speakin' out, sir, but I don't like to see 'em makin' game of you."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Harraby Vasey, not without a secret tremor. These earth-born creatures had a shrewdness on occasions, and a way of blurting out home-truths, which sometimes hurt.

"Why, sir, your thinking as it's Mr. Robert Vasey wrote all that in the newspapers."

"I never thought he wrote it."

"Well, let's say, worked it somehow. There's

not a mossel o' trewth in that. The Tories dosed you with it, just to see how much you'd swaller ; and that's kept the whole town laughin' now these six months. That's been on the tip o' my tongue to tell ye more than once."

"That's gone on long enough. That's gettin' sickenin'," said another of the worthies.

Mr. Harraby Vasey's ears were tingling, and he felt as if his brain were going to burst.

"I was not deceived. I never thought the man you speak of was other than an agent or a go-between," he said, with studied calmness ; and he went into a lengthy explanation, ascribing the whole thing to the party spirit of Lord Mells.

"The Earl ! Not him, sir !" The name was hailed with roars of laughter. "You mustn't go a-fancyin' like that ! He ain't the man to interfere in politics—too much the gentleman ! And he've bigger things than that to think about. Why, I don't suppose he hardly know as you're alive," guffawed the frog-like man.

"There's nothing in it, sir ! Take that from me !" another shouted.

"Anyhow, it is of no importance, since I never worried much about it," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, with a nervous laugh.

Profoundly chagrined, though he strove to hide the fact, he took his leave soon after, shaking hands all round.

Emerging from the inn, he bent his steps towards the Rectory, where Beryl was paying a duty call. The shower had passed ; the sky was blue again ; the roofs and footwalks glittered in the sun ; the

song of skylarks could be heard above the voices of the town. He had not gone far before he met his daughter, and turned towards home. Feeling the need of exercise, they had agreed to walk, arming themselves with waterproofs against the caprice of the weather.

Beryl was looking radiant, he observed with irritation. He did not like to be the only person worried.

"It's most disheartening," he told her, "after all I've done. These people are so sly and so unprincipled. They tell me lies, and then make fun of me for believing them. My so-called friends and enemies are all alike—all hold together. They laugh at me and slander me behind my back for months, and no one has the decency to tell me what is going on."

"I don't think they're as bad as all that, really, dad!" said Beryl, laughing.

She could not at that moment take misfortunes seriously, for Eric had at last proposed to her. Calling for letters as she passed the post-office, she had been given one of which the contents proved as follows:

"MY DEAR BERYL,

"I love you, and have been trying for days to ask you to marry me, but somehow my tongue gets knotted when I want to say it. So I think it best to write. I shall look in at the Grange tomorrow. If it is all right, you might just nod to me. Then I shall get courage and perhaps find my tongue. Otherwise I shall go abroad directly.

"Yours always,

"ERIC TAVAN."

Considering that he had been alone with her for half an hour that very morning, after the letter had been written and posted, and had talked of nothing in particular, the thing was comical. She promised herself to tease him well upon the morrow, and in the meanwhile felt absurdly happy.

"Now, there's that farmer-man, my precious cousin!" Her father carried on his moan of grievance. "He might have told me it was all a hoax about his giving information to the Tory Press. Everyone told me so, and I believed it. I call that unforgivable. They're all alike—grinning, ill-mannered boors. No one would believe the wickedness and immorality which, to my certain knowledge, goes on daily in our village; and the so-called gentlefolks are not much better. They're all three centuries behind the times."

"You mustn't worry, dad! I'm sure it's nothing, really! You'll make yourself quite ill!" said Beryl, smiling down from heights of bliss.

"Nothing, indeed! How would you like it yourself?" It was not the least of Mr. Harraby Vasey's torments that his wife and daughter always made light of his agitations in a soothing way, as if he were a child to be told there was no bruise where one was palpable.

When very near to home, they heard strange noises, and recognized the barbarous music which led all the village demonstrations. One of the motley processions, which had been infrequent through the winter, was coming down from the heath. It would reach the stile upon the road as soon as they did.

Beryl was for turning back, but her father strode on resolutely, saying :

“ I don’t care ! ”

By misfortune some of the demonstrators came before them on the road, and some behind. They found themselves in the midst of the procession, which escorted them with jeers and laughter as far as the Grange drive-gate. Beryl was but little disconcerted. One of the Ditcher children bobbed to her, and said “ Good-evening, miss.” She walked with her hand upon the small girl’s shoulder. But her father had the look of a stoned prophet, of one whose body winces though his mind be lost in other worlds.

“ We got a good old guy this time, my hearties ! ” someone bawled. “ Here’s greedy Dicky walkin’ ’long of us ! He bain’t proud, bless ye ! He’s a Liberal, the people’s friend ! ”

The din of the rough band drowned all the laughter, its members cutting capers as they played like mad. Beryl, still smiling, drew her father’s arm through hers. They gained their own drive-gate amid derisive cheers. The crowd kept on the highroad.

Half-way to the house, enjoying peace and quiet and the garden odours, they were overtaken by a well-dressed man of bright appearance. He lifted his hat.

“ I represent the *British Lion*, sir, and should be deeply grateful if you could grant me a short interview. We desire to lay both sides before our readers.”

Mr. Harraby Vasey fenced him off, exclaiming :
“ Get away ! ”

"My father is tired of everything to do with newspapers," said Beryl pleasantly. "We have some reason to regard them as a public nuisance."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," the reporter said politely, and retired at once.

Beryl ran into the house to show her mother Eric's letter. Her father stayed out in the garden, pacing its paths till he regained composure. As he looked upon the charming house, with its deep brooding roofs and many gables, its quaint chimneys, dormer windows, white-railed balconies, its variation of oak-beams and rough-cast with severe brick and pseudo-ancient tiles, set there amid trim gardens, sheltered by the firwood, tears filled his eyes. He thought of all the happiness he might have found here but for the malice and unreason of his neighbours, rich and poor.

In this connection he beheld himself rather as a principle than as a man. His was the cause of the enlightened stranger—of the civilizing pioneer among barbarians. It was simply as a stranger that his actions were condemned, derided; that he was subjected to this persecution which was wearing out his life. He got no help from anyone; he stood alone. But this reflection, far from pride, produced dejection. That right would triumph in the end, he never doubted. The only question was, could he endure?

XLII

Not until they sat at dinner did Mr. Harraby Vasey notice Jerry's absence, and ask what had become of him. His wife said he was taking a short holiday, to recover from the shock of late events.

"Poor boy!" she said. "He was so dreadfully upset." Her tone and glance reproached the tyrant gently.

"The best thing he could do," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, escaping from the point of that reproach by magnanimity. "With time to think things over, he will see the force of what I said."

He now admitted having taken a wrong tone with Jerry. The most he should have asked him was to wait a year or two. If only the dear boy would wait, he felt assured that he would throw off this infatuation, and seek more refined ideals. He had always looked to Jerry's marriage to implant his seed among the greater gentry of the land. This derogation was the mere result of dull seclusion and some sentimental reading—of juxtaposition and restricted choice.

"He'll soon get over it," he said, picking an olive from the dish beside him.

Mrs. Harraby Vasey shook her head and smiled sedately.

"But, dad, what's wrong with Alice? She's a

decent sort !” said Beryl, who, for love of Eric, had grown slangy.

Mr. Harraby Vasey scorned to argue. He shook his head, and murmured :

“ I’ve been young myself !”

Thus, given to expect that Jerry would be absent for two days at least, he was surprised when, at eleven o’clock next morning, his son walked into the study.

Leaving London by the first train in the morning, Jerry had gone first to Cloverfield with Robert Vasey, in order to confess his sins to Alice, who was as eager to avow her own shortcomings. He had been polite to Ethel, whom he found established in high favour at the farm.

“ You might have told me !” was his sole reproach to her ; to which she answered :

“ How you would have stormed !” She had a look that could disarm the sternest censor.

After breakfast he had walked to Larkmeadow, and brought a whiff of fresh air with him to the study, always overwarmed for more than half the year.

“ Your usual fug, dad !” was his first remark ; with which he went up to his father, and, laying one hand on the desk, articulated : “ Sorry I misbehaved the other night. I forgot myself entirely, I’m afraid.”

Mr. Harraby Vasey, deeply moved, took his son’s hand and squeezed it tenderly. He swallowed once or twice before he could reply. There was a noise of fresh arrival in the hall, and Tavan’s voice exclaiming :

“ Mr. Harraby Vasey ! Busy, is he ? Where’s Miss Beryl ?”

“ It is for you to forgive me, Gerald. I was surprised and—I confess it—disappointed. All I should have said to you, upon reflection, is : Both you and she are fully young to think of marrying. Wait a year or two, unbound by any promise, and see if you don’t change your mind.”

“ That is practically what we always meant to do,” said Jerry cheerfully. “ But there’s another thing I want to say. I’ve been a selfish bounder lately, not a bit of use to you, although I know you have no end of worrying business. I’ve worked a bit, but haven’t taken any interest. I wish you’d let me help you for the future, and take the less important business off your hands. It would really do me good. I need employment.”

“ Thank you, Jerry ; this is a great comfort to me. I am afraid I have been hard on you for some time past. Shall we both agree to let bygones be bygones ?”

In search of his mother, to whom he had much to tell, Jerry looked into the drawing-room, and there surprised his sister in a strange predicament. Beryl, drawing down Eric Tavan’s face with both her hands, was kissing him in an abandoned way. His arms were round her !

“ Well, I’m blessed !” said Jerry. “ Sorry !”

He was retiring hastily, but Tavan rushed at him and seized his hand, compressing it, when seized, with all his might.

“ Congratulate me ! It’s all come right at last, and here I am, the happiest man alive !”

He rushed off to tell any other members of the household he could come across, the first being

Grain, the butler, who, when pounced on, grinned respectfully, and said : " I'm glad to hear it, sir," in a soothing tone.

" Isn't he a nice big baby ?" Beryl sighed admiringly.

Mr. Harraby Vasey, just emerging from his study, was called upon to share the lover's joy, which he did earnestly. Nothing in the world, he said, could please him better.

" I'll make the mater call this afternoon," cried Eric, still demented. " I'll bring her in the car myself. She'll be as pleased as I am. My father's up in London. I shall wire to him."

" Mr. Catchpole would like to see you, sir, a moment," put in Grain at Mr. Harraby Vasey's elbow.

" It can't be anything important. Bring him here."

" Good-morning," called out Mr. Harraby Vasey pleasantly, as the ex-policeman came to join them, looking rather sheepish. " We're just enjoying some good news—the first for months."

Eric Tavan hastened to inform this new arrival how he had that morning suddenly become the happiest man alive.

" I wish you joy, I'm sure, sir," murmured Mr. Catchpole, " and I'm sorry my news isn't half as pleasant. Poor old Atheist, sir"—he turned to Mr. Harraby Vasey—" were mobbed by some of 'em and set upon last night. He's now laid up, and keeps asking for you. I didn't know nothing of all this till this morning, being up in London."

" By Jove, yes ! I remember now. It's in the

paper. I brought it with me on purpose to show," cried Eric, smiting his forehead.

He produced a newspaper from the breast-pocket of his Norfolk coat, and showed it to Jerry, as the only person who gave heed to him. There was a headline—

" MORE DISTURBANCES AT LARKMEADOW.

" MR. HARRABY VASEY'S ADHERENTS MOBBED AND
THREATENED.

" A MAN INJURED."

" I'll go with you at once," said Mr. Harraby Vasey.

On this recurrence of his troubles at so glad a moment his features underwent the strong contraction which one associates with stabbing pains. In truth, it came upon him as a mortal illness.

XLIII

MR. PREVIOUS lay in bed with his head bandaged, his lean old face appearing quite majestic in its stern repose. As Mr. Harraby Vasey came up the ladder from the living-room, he called out, "Mind your head, sir!" without moving.

"How are you feeling now?" the visitor inquired, with deep solicitude.

"There's a tidy bit o' pain about my forehead and my jints," was the reply. "But doctor says as that bain't noways sarious. I shall be about again and well in a fortnight. That were an accident, in a mander o' speakin'. They was a-mobbin' of me on that bridge agen ta school, and I fell down and hut meself like what yow see. That worn't about my troubles as I sent for yow, sir; that was to ax yow to have a care for yer own self. Ta way them hoggish brewts go on agen ye make me feared. I couldn't bear for any harm to come to yow, as stand for sense and light and reason in this here den o' superstitious ignorance."

"Have no fear for me," said Mr. Harraby Vasey soothingly. "My only trouble is on your account——"

"But dew yow promise not to go abroad o' nights?" the Atheist pleaded. "They'd stretch a wire across ta road as sune as look And if yow

was afoot, they'd set on ye. I've heerd 'em swear they'll be the death o' yow."

After trying in vain to persuade the sick man that his fears were moonshine, Mr. Harraby Vasey promised to use every caution, and went down the ladder to the living-room, where Mr. Catchpole and Jerry waited for him. He was glad to escape from the close atmosphere of the bedroom, from a scene of poverty and suffering which rent his heart.

"That's a good bit Atheist's own fault, ye know," said Mr. Catchpole. "They wouldn't heed him if he didn't talk to rile 'em."

"I cannot blame him," Mr. Harraby Vasey answered sternly, the least tone of censure towards the injured man, his martyr, offending him like blasphemy just then.

He needed a religious silence, having much to ponder. The morning's experience had convinced him that he was hated in the village, and he had never met with actual hatred in his life before. The responsibility, wherever it devolved, was terrible. He strove to throw it all upon his enemies; but none the less, as he thought of that poor old man lying so patiently in that mean, stuffy room, faithful to him with a dog's fidelity in spite of suffering, he had a sense of guilt as well as sorrow.

After a few words with a woman who was in attendance on the invalid, he made his way to Mr. Rush's shop, Jerry and Mr. Catchpole still escorting him. There, amid the atmosphere of apples, cheese, and bacon, he ordered certain dainties to be sent to the sick man. Mr. Rush was downright tearful when he spoke of the disorders.

"I don't know, sir, what things be a-coming to, I'm sure I don't," he whimpered. "They've spread a kind of tarror in the place, and no one daren't gainsay them. They ha' threatened me that fearful as I dussen't go agen 'em."

"A faint heart, that's what you suffer from," said Mr. Catchpole, chuckling. "They threaten me, too, every time they see me. That don't break no bones. I'm not afeared of any of 'em, and they know it."

"Ah, yow be used to warfare, as one may say," wailed the shopkeeper; "what's more, yow bain't in business in the place. A man in business have to be more cautious."

"Well, I'll give ye a tip, Rush: if ever they attack you, just you hit 'em with a stick across the knees, and cut and run. They 'on't be fit to foller for a minute. And Mr. Harraby Vasey here could do a sight o' mischief with that gingham. Just prod 'em in the wind, sir, hard! Don't swipe; just prod. The point's the thing."

Seeing how this conversation vexed his father, Jerry led him out. All the way home he tried to hearten him, explaining that the talk of fighting was a joke. Mr. Harraby Vasey, however, was depressed for the remainder of the day; sitting idle in his study, staring out, unseeing, at the April showers, which fell like sparkling flights of fairy spears, each followed by a gleam as swift as laughter. His wife, hearing that he had been threatened, imagined him in terror of his life, and entreated him at once to claim police protection. He scoffed at that, for he was suffering, not from

fear, but memory—the thought of one who suffered for his sake. Then, not knowing what to do, Mrs. Harraby Vasey adjured Jerry to use his personal influence with the villagers to dissuade them from further violence.

Accordingly, that evening Jerry called at Mr. Catchpole's cottage to discuss his chances with that prophet before trying them.

"I'm on my way to talk to all those fellows at the Chequers," he explained. "My father's sick to death at this fresh trouble in the place. It looks nasty. What's the matter with the men? I always thought the row about the heath was three parts fun."

"That was at first," the sage replied; "but they've got botty, what with all this notice being took of them; till now, to hear 'em talk, they're holy angels and your dear father just the opposite. If that was only Larkmeadow, I'd stop the row myself with a few others; but there's chaps from Nornham, and from Lowestoft, even Ipswich, come and keep the pot a-boiling! That wasn't none of our own chaps as hurt Atheist. Talk to 'em? You may talk! I've tired myself. But that's no harm your trying."

Jerry gave one last look to the snug room, to Katey's golden head bowed over needlework, to Mrs. Catchpole's well-known cap and stomacher; then sallied forth with desperate resolution, knowing nothing till he found himself in the taproom of the Chequers, the object of some twenty pairs of eyes.

"Wa, that's Mas'r Jerry. Evenun, Mas'r Jerry!" came from all sides.

"I want to say something to you all—want to ask a favour," Jerry faltered, crippled by acute self-consciousness.

"Say on, sir!" said the man called Harbut, who appeared to be the chairman of the gathering.

"Well, haven't you done enough to plague my father? He's got a lot to worry him just now. He's downright ill. It would be awfully decent of you to give the thing a rest for a few weeks. The newspaper men are making game of all of us, and working up the trouble, just to write about it."

"Stop there, sir!" Harbut charged him with solemnity. "We dew but ax for our rights. That's common land. And why have he laid low all these here months while we've been a-processionin' and what not, dewin' all we could to draw un out and make un go to law agen us? O'cause he fear us times we're on the job; then, by-and-by, when we bain't playin', he'll come down on us wi' some ole mucky trick or other. That's our grievance. Dew he'd let our rights alone, we ha'n't got nawn on arth agen ta gennleman."

"Yow be all right, Mas'r Jerry, bo'," added another voice, Joe Turpin's. "If that was yow, there wouldn't be no troubles. But, ye see, we 'on't be robbed and trod on, not by no man."

"Well, I'm sorry! I thought you were better sportsmen!" was his parting shot.

Going back to Mr. Catchpole's, he announced his ill-success.

"That's done no harm, though. That'll shame 'em when they come to think," was his friend's comment.

XLIV

As a fact, the conversation at the Chequers, after Jerry's inroad, took on a relenting, almost contrite tone.

"That dew seems rayther hard upon ta poor old dear! That ha' gone on sich a while, and if he's feelin' modrit!" sighed Joe Turpin feelingly. "And we all know as how he reckoned that was done with at ta council meetin', and then again time Dodman were convicted. He ha' had his trials, there bain't no gainsayin'. That seem a shame to keep things draggin' on—tormentin' o' ta man, as Jerry say. Now, what I ax is, bain't there not no way for us to take and finish of un neat and clean? That fare more marciful!"

"None as I know on," muttered Harbut. "A shame t' old Dodman bain't about. He were a man as knowed a thing or tew."

"They dew say as how, once a funeral ha' been over anywheres, that make that common land for evermore," remarked an old man present, in a piping drawl.

"Be that right, Mr. Hillun?"

"I ha' heard that said," replied the landlord guardedly.

"I reckon that's ta trewth. Ta dead be free

and holy, and kind o' hallers what they pass acrost, and makes that free."

The whole company looked at one another, recognizing the immense importance of this statement.

"There's poor old Martin lyin' stiff this minnut," observed Harbut. "When be they a-goin' to bury un, anyone know?"

"About Monday or Tuesday, I should think," said Turpin. "Carter'd know; he've got ta order for ta cawfun."

"He were a shanny sort o' old flart," someone objected.

"That don't consarn us," piped the ancient man who had first broached the subject. "All we want's a corpse. That make no differ what he were in life. Ta dead be free and holy."

"Well, keep that dark! We don't want no one mellin'."

The idea, thus started, soon took active shape. Old Martin, bed-ridden for years, and so unknown in life save to a few near neighbours, became in death an object of consideration. His nearest relatives, a son and daughter, approached in flattering terms, and sworn to secrecy, were dazzled by the offer of a public funeral; for the demonstrators undertook to bear all costs by means of a collection among friends and sympathizers, and promised them a goodly train of mourners. The cottage where the body lay was, by good fortune, in the right direction, adjoining the Bell Inn, not five hundred yards from the gap in the new fence where the disputed path went up through fir-trees to the heath. It was not unnatural that a walking

funeral should take that path to church. All preparations were conducted with the closest secrecy and, be it said, without a shadow of irreverence.

“ This here’s a solemn job, mind you, you young uns !” said Harbut at the Chequers on the Monday evening. “ None o’ your frolics and philanderin’ together, dew yow’ll suffer for it all your days. We shall have ta dead along of us, and that mean mischief. Folks had best stand clear. There’s them alive ha’ been struck dumb and blinded for liftin’ of a hand agen ta dead.”

On Tuesday, directly after lunch, Jerry and his father went to visit Mr. Pretious, who still kept his bed. Jerry proposed that they should return by the heath, having remarked his father’s nervous agitation when traversing the village, and judging that the enemies were all at work as usual at that time of day. Thus it happened that they met old Martin’s funeral.

It was a day of lowering cloud, the very air was grey. The heath looked black when they first came upon it, until the black-clad train appearing proved it of a sombre green. Emerging from the fir-wood by the mill, the procession left the path and went up to the boundary hedge, returned to the verge of the cliff overlooking the village, then back to the hedge again, drawing line beside line precisely as one does in ploughing, the intention being that no parcel of the heath should escape the liberating virtue of the dead. Despite the eccentricity of this proceeding, the men moved decorously, wearing solemn masks ; the women hid their faces in white handkerchiefs.

Mr. Harraby Vasey stood and stared intently,

poised between horror and intense disgust. He knew what they were after well enough ; and it seemed to him a gruesome and revolting thing, to see a corpse employed, like soap, for a specific purpose. The gross materialism of such superstition shocked him greatly ; but, worse than all, he felt it taking hold upon his brain, so weak from worry that it had not energy sufficient to control impressions. The ghastly sight, he knew, was going to haunt him. Jerry, alarmed at his wan looks, suggested, as he had done twice already, that they should turn and go home by the village.

His father petulantly shook his head and lingered, glowering at the black-palled coffin carried shoulder-high.

When, in the course of their strange progress, the train of mourners drew near to him, he called out :

“ I suppose you know that you are doing a disgraceful and unheard-of thing, approaching sacrilege, and one that has no weight at all in law ? ”

A woman in the train removed her handkerchief from her eyes a moment, looking shocked. No other of the mourners deigned to glance in his direction. The bearers of the coffin did not pause. Both father and son took off their hats when it was carried past them, in recognition of their own mortality. Mr. Harraby Vasey then walked homewards at a feverish pace. At the top of the fir-wood they came upon a well-dressed man, bent nearly double in the act to light his pipe. On seeing the Harraby Vaseys, he sprang up and raised his hat.

“ A curious scene, is it not ? ” he remarked con-

versationally. "A bit of medieval folklore strayed into the twentieth century."

He nodded towards the funeral, which was still solemnly perambulating, the coffin carried high, the mourners wading in the gorse. The church bell tolled at intervals from the grey tower seen in the background among leafless trees. "I don't suppose that there are three other men in England who have witnessed such a thing. I should be very glad to have your views about it, sir." He bowed to Mr. Harraby Vasey, senior. "I may tell you that I represent the *Flame*."

The young man had a pleasant face. Mr. Harraby Vasey smiled at him and raised his hat. He then walked on.

Approaching the Grange, they came on Mr. Catchpole, clad in the broadcloth which he always wore when on official errands.

"I've come to ask what you mean to do, sir. You ought to take and prosecute the lot, that's my opinion, and put a stop to all such notions. You'll find the countryside is with you. The parish council can't do nothing, as you know, though it's just the sort of business as would come within our jurisdiction if we was what we ought to be—a proper local government with power and money. The land not being ours, nor yet the path, I'm here on behalf of the parish to ask you to prosecute all those concerned in this here business of the funeral, which will wholly scandalize the place. I only heard of it about the time they started, and dressed myself at once and came up here, but you was out."

"It will be all right," said Jerry hurriedly. "My father will, of course, do all that's necessary."

"All that's necessary," echoed Mr. Harraby Vasey with a vague smile.

Mr. Catchpole, looking at him for the first time with attention, changed his tone at once for one of cheerfulness.

"Well, that's all right, then. We don't want to worry," he remarked, and took his leave.

As he strode away he frowned, and with his teeth clenched murmured : "Well, they've fairly done him this time. Poor old dear !"

XLV

THAT same evening it was rumoured in the village that Mr. Harraby Vasey had been taken with some kind of seizure ; and on the morrow it was known for certain that the owner of the Grange was lying dangerously ill. The Atheist, when the sad tidings reached him, sat up in bed and cursed the wicked like a Christian ; Mr. Rush and others of his kidney shook their heads and murmured : " A bad business ! " and the general gloom would have been evident to a chance comer to the place, despite the dimpling April sunshine, flowering gardens, and the song of birds.

" Well, you together are a lot of proper beauties. Ain't you proud ? " said Mr. Catchpole to Joe Turpin on the allotments, where they had adjoining plots.

" Yow marnt blame us for this here job," the reply came in an aggrieved tone. " We never went not for to harm ta pore ole dear. Fightin' 'long o' gentry fare like fightin' 'long o' gals ; yow hit out fair and square and you're a bloody brewt."

In truth, the sorrow felt by mere onlookers on account of Mr. Harraby Vasey's illness was as nothing to the consternation of his actual enemies. Even a long and touching notice of old Martin's funeral in the *Flame* :

" That solemn rite based upon old-world faith,

performed druidically, as it were, upon an open heath. . . . The sad procession moving slowly, reverently, weaving its spell of paces which should free the land. The lines of strong, grave men, the weeping women . . . a picture gripping the spectator and transporting him to bygone days, when religion was the only friend of the oppressed, and death, their sole deliverance, bulked largely in the eyes of a downtrodden proletariat. For it implied a faith that all the dead are free and equal, that death can desolate the rich man's pride," and so on.

Even this brought no elation to the village heroes ; and when urbane reporters wished to sit with them and talk as usual, they rebelled.

" We don't want no more furriners a-mellin' here," said Harbut. " Yow can clear out when ye like together ; and if yow 'on't we'll make ye. We ha' had enow o' your contrusions."

The mincing cockneys did not need a second hint.

The news that Mr. Harraby Vasey's state was growing worse instead of better caused the stalwarts secretly to mop their foreheads. Though in public they might sturdily deny that they had caused his illness, in private guilt weighed heavily upon them.

" That's partly his own fault," said Harbut doggedly, " for standin' forth agen us on the heth that day."

" I knowed how that 'd be," put in another with deep melancholy, " the minnut as he raised his voice agen ta dead up there o' Tuesday. There baint no doubt but what ta dead ha' got mystarious powers. Ta dead hand open what ta livin' can't, and when that's took a hold that 'on't

let go for nobody. Gen ta old Dodman were about, he'd take and splain that to ye, bein' a gradawit in them things, as ye may say. I don't go no fudderer than what I heerd and seed. T'old dear stood up and spoke agen ta dead, and now they tell me he ha' had palattic stroke."

" 'Tis to be hoped as he 'on't take and die, though ; dew that'd make us fare a bit low-sperrited !"

" Well, there's one thing sarten, that there heth be common now, bein' as how ta dead ha' compassed that in every part."

But though the land was theirs so certainly, the end of all their efforts thus attained, there was not a trace of exultation in their speech or bearing. They seemed the vanquished, with their dogged looks, their self excuses, and their strange reluctance to all further action. It was significant of the change that, after Martin's funeral, nobody went upon the heath or used the footpath. The children ceased to play there after school. The place had grown uncanny and accursed. Love of fair play constituting the best of their morality, the champions felt ashamed of having won by supernatural means. A thing that felled a man without a blow, with power to blind or paralyze, or even kill him, seemed no fair weapon in the strife of mortal man.

On Sundays, after midday dinner, a square meal, it was an honoured custom with the Chequers coterie—the only group in Larkmeadow that had a corporate existence—to gather at Joe Turpin's pigstye, and, leaning on the palings, smoke a pipe or two in concert, watching the pigs, until digestion was accomplished, when they moved in a body to the

cross-roads by the school ; where, leaning with backs against the school-yard fence or perched upon the handrail of the adjacent footbridge, they gossiped and made sport of passers-by. It was an institution in the village, and was known as the "camp meeting."

They had reached this stage upon the Sunday following old Martin's funeral when Mr. Catchpole came out of his cottage and approached them. The ex-policeman wore a frock coat and high hat, as usual upon Sundays, when he walked into Nornham to chapel with his wife and daughter morning and evening.

"Well, are you happy?" was his salutation. "You've well-nigh killed the gentleman with all your silly nonsense, and now he owns himself beaten and presents the heath and footpath to the parish, being sick o' hearing of 'em. Myself, I wouldn't say thank-you for a win like that, but I guess as you together 'll fare reg'lar pleased."

He glanced scornfully from one to another of the paladins, who all looked fit to cry.

"Yow ha'n't got no call to come a-naggin' on us this way, Mr. Catchpull," wailed Harbut in a deeply injured tone. "Yow know right well as how we never went not for to harm ta pore ole dear. That were his fault for standin' up agen us. As for that there land, 'twas known for common years afore he come into ta place. He didn't ought to bag what don't belong tew un. And arter Tuesday he were 'bliged to give that up, bein' as we'd passed ta dead all over ut."

"Silly nonsense!" hissed out Mr. Catchpole. His contempt, like a whip-lash, called the blood to all

their faces. " I'll take and pop a corpse into your pigstye, Joe, then that'll be public property, the hogs and all."

" I 'ouldn't let yow dew ut !"

" Then you'd be struck dead or silly or some'at for stoppin' of me. Lot o' nonsense ! You ha'n't fought straight, and you know it ! And you've let them newspaper fellers drive you like a flock of sheep. Slinks and silly fools, that's what I call you. You do look a drop-gallows crew for mighty conquerors ! A lot o' noble heroes, ain't ye ? Go and drink !"

With that injunction, useless since the inn was closed, Mr. Catchpole turned his back upon the Sabbath-keepers, heedless of their volleys of invective. He knew they were at heart as vexed as he was at Mr. Harraby Vasey's weak surrender. This had been announced to him by Jerry on the previous evening.

" Come, come, we can't have that," had been his protest. " The other side are fairly done. He must keep heart ! And caving in like this 'll finish his election chances."

" He has given that up as well. The worry of the two together caused his illness, and, unless he can throw over all that sort of thing, it doesn't seem as if he cared to live."

" Well, I am vexed," said Mr. Catchpole with a pained grimace. If he was troubled, the champions of the people's rights were quite annihilated. There was not a man among them who felt any triumph. The heath itself became a butt for their ill-humour.

" That ain't no good to no one," said Joe Turpin angrily.

"I wish that were at bottom o' ta sea," snarled Harbut.

The "old dear," as they called him, being like to die through their mean action, that he should give them all they claimed was agonizing, the Christian turning of the other cheek which scathes an adversary. The position seemed unbearable.

As the result of much heart-searching, joyless drinking and dejected thought, a deputation consisting of Joe Turpin and the sailor Harbut waited upon Mr. Catchpole one fine evening. They were wearing their best clothes and spoke respectfully.

"We be come to ax ye how ta gennleman at ta New House fare to-day?" said Harbut first.

"Still very moderate, by what I hear," was the reply.

"Ah," sighed Joe wretchedly, "and so they tell me. He keep a-dewin' and a-dewin', but 'tis wholly slow."

There was a long pause, during which the spokesmen of the people looked askance at one another. Joe kept nudging Harbut, who at length found voice to say :

"We was wishful to present ta heth and footpath back tew un, bein' as some say we ha'n't dealt not fairly . . ."

"Eh? . . . Well, I like that!" chuckled Mr. Catchpole. "Who do you together think you are? You ain't the parish, nor yet a quarter of it. You forget there's others in the place as good as you. I fared right sick myself when Mr. Jerry told me that his father had give up, and I done my best to stop him from so doing. But he insist, and so

that's going to be parish property, and not only for your little gang. The title'll be made over to the parish council in due form, and that'll be for the good o' the whole place. There's a niceish bit o' frontage to that lane would come in handy if we ever wished to build two cottages ; and when there's call for ground for games or what not, we can let you have a pitch there for a trifle. That's not going to be your rubbish-heap, so don't you think it."

"There don't fare to be no way for us rough chaps to show our sorrer, then," said Harbut, nearly weeping in his disappointment. "We know you acted straight and thoughtful all along ; not like old Rush, as slink and cringe and lie ; and so we comes to yow in trouble like. That dew seems rayther hard as us chaps can't dew nawthun to make up to nobody, not for what we done amiss. If there be anything as we could dew to mend our ways like, and yow'd tell us, that'd ease our minds."

"Come on ta parish council, one of you ! Mr. Harraby Vasey, he've resigned his seat, and so've old Tommy. Mr. Jerry's going to join us very likely, and we could do with one of you. We want all sorts, you, see, in my opinion, to be representative. And you chaps would be some use if you'd just be sensible, for you're the one set in the place as hold together."

"I dare say we could manage that," said Harbut sheepishly.

"We'll have a ballot at ta pub to-night," said Joe.

XLVI

THE sudden, unforeseen collapse of a man till then supposed to be case-hardened in conceit produced a wave of pity and remorse throughout the neighbourhood. Jerry had to receive a host of sympathetic visitors on behalf of his mother, who was busy in the sick room, and to answer endless letters of condolence.

The Liberals of the constituency expressed their grief collectively on hearing of Mr. Harraby Vasey's resignation, while the agent called in person, and, pacing up and down the hall in great distress, exclaimed to Jerry :

" It's the master pity, just when all was coming right. His breaking down was just the very thing, the neatest, prettiest move he could have made. It's won all hearts ; it's given just the touch of sentiment we wanted. I never saw a candidate make way so fast. A few months ago he was a stranger and distrusted, and now he's the best-known man in the division, and a martyr. If only he'd have held his ground, and not caved in ! It does seem such a wicked waste of opportunity."

Jerry submitted that his father, lying at death's door, could hardly be expected to regard his illness as a move in a game. But the agent would have

none of it ; he pished and pshawed in fierce derision of a view so chicken-hearted.

Mr. Catchpole, who saw Jerry every day, showed quite another face of disappointment.

“ It’s when I come to think of all the money your dear father’s spent, what they call “ nursing ” the constituency—subscriptions to no end o’ useless things, and bearing half the cost of that there recreation ground at Nornham, and private charity, as people call it, right and left, not to speak of entertaining folks he don’t much like. We were talking of it at the last council meeting, and we reckoned as he must ha’ spent a matter of four thousand pound, what with one thing and another. All on nothing, as you may say. Now, if he’d given but a half of that to the parish, you’d ha’ seen a sight o’ difference in Larkmedder. The waste on things that further nothing make me sick.”

“ Well, if ever I’m rich I’ll give you two thousand for the parish just to play with,” replied Jerry, laughing. “ It’ll make up for those Cambridge debts of mine.”

“ I shall hold you down to that, mind,” came the eager answer.

Eric Tavan reported himself at the Grange every day with no other wish than to be useful in his dear one’s neighbourhood. He helped Jerry with the load of business which devolved on him. His marriage with Beryl, it was understood, was to take place as soon as Mr. Harraby Vasey’s health was re-established ; but the period of convalescence proved both long and anxious.

At the end of three months from the date of his

first seizure, Mr. Harraby Vasey was permitted to go out every day for a short drive, after a week or two of which indulgence the doctors thought he might be moved to Bournemouth, where it was arranged that he should stay throughout the autumn. Accompanying his father upon one of those funereal drives through country lanes, Jerry ventured to submit to him the project, which exercised his thoughts at that time, of studying with a view to some profession. Mr. Harraby Vasey hated every feature of the landscape, intimately associated with the troubles which had caused his illness, and expected Jerry to distract his thoughts from it. When he found his son discoursing in a tone of business, and heard him mention his desire for independence, he felt defrauded, and at once grew lachrymose.

"What more can you want than you have got already? All the past has been forgiven; you do what you like. You will step into my shoes when I depart. The date is not far distant. Surely you can wait till then."

Alarmed at the sick man's agitation, Jerry hastened to protest that he had not the least intention of deserting him, had merely wished to learn to stand alone.

"You will have a chance of doing that while I'm at Bournemouth. I shall leave you in command here with full powers. You have passed the age of boyish fancies now, and I can trust you to take care of your position and not go forming undesirable connections."

As he uttered the last words Mr. Harraby Vasey took his son's hand as if to ask forgiveness for their

friendly chiding. Fear to excite his father in his feeble state prevented Jerry from at once correcting the grave misunderstanding thus betrayed, which, however, weighed upon his mind.

Mr. Catchpole, when consulted on this new dilemma, chuckled :

“ Don't say nothing ! Just you take Mr. Vasey's offer at Cloverfield, and study estate business all the time your pa's away. If only, having studied, you could drop into a job of some sort that'd make him jump ! He think of you as helpless, and he act according.”

Katey added words of consolation :

“ Your father can't go on for ever disapproving, when everyone can see as you and Miss Alice are just made for one another. Father says the parish ought to vote or petition or something ; the pair of you would be so welcome in the place.”

Mr. Harraby Vasey might be all alone in disapproval, but he had no inkling of his solitude ; and, as he would very likely have been undismayed had he discovered it, basing his conduct on what public opinion ought to be, not what it was, Jerry found little help in these assurances. He had to reduce a very fortress of unreason, and the siege bade fair to be a long and tiring one. Eric and Beryl were his staunch adherents, as servants of true love wherever found. The former promised to speak up for him when Mr. Harraby Vasey joined the bride and bridegroom in the South of France, as it was arranged he should do on the expiration of their honeymoon. But Jerry's hope was in his own unaided efforts. No sooner was he left alone at

the Grange—his mother and Beryl having gone to Bournemouth with the invalid—than he began his studies under Farmer Robert, a hard master.

As pupil of her father he saw Alice every day, though only for a moment as he came and went. She, too, was working for their common end, acquiring household skill and reading books he lent her. She found the latter entertaining, to her own surprise, for she had flouted books in her athletic pride. Her brothers, three of whom came home for August, regarded Alice as fun spoilt, a sad example. They teased the lovers mercilessly, but with no effect. That they had never in this world been seen to kiss was the burden of an endless joke at their expense! Jerry was thankful when the plagues departed.

Beryl was married quietly in London. The bride and bridegroom were to winter in the South of France. They both pressed Jerry to go out and join them later on, but, absorbed in his own projects, he refused politely.

One morning, when he was at work alone in the estate office at Jelwick Park, stealing an hour while Robert Vasey and his son were at their lunch, Lord Mells came in quite unexpectedly. Jerry sprang up in some confusion, feeling it incumbent on him to explain his presence there. Lord Mells obliged him to sit down again, saying that he knew about it and was pleased to see him. He sat down near him, and, surveying his appearance, said :

“ So you’re the mortal who aspires to carry off that woodland nymph, my god-daughter. But I understand that there are dragons to be overcome.”

"Any amount, sir," answered Jerry, "but I mean to smash them!"

"That's right," was the reply. "From what I hear, you're going the right way. You are very wise to study estate business; you will find it of immense advantage when you come into your property. You ought, I think, to be actually someone's agent for a year or two, when you are capable; it is the only way of testing your acquirements—I may say, also, of completing them. If you think of it, I dare say I could help you to a post."

When Jerry reported this to Robert Vasey, the farmer scoffed :

"Don't count your chickens yet ! There's months of work ahead of you, my boy, before you're fit for any berth at all. Now, I've been thinking : there are kinds of business that we don't see much of here. I'll write this evening to John Dutt, the auctioneer in Nornham, to ask him what he'd charge to give you lessons twice a week. There are bits of law and banking that he'll put you up to, besides telling you the best books to buy and read."

Jerry's lessons with the auctioneer of Nornham caused no small stir among the gentry of the place. It was said that he was studying to be a salesman, that he preferred such men as Dutt to his own equals. But when it was ascertained that the derogation was but temporary, with a view to master every detail of the management of an estate like that he would of course inherit, it became a commonplace of gossip that young Harraby Vasey, for all his wildness, had a head upon his shoulders and would make a man. He was invited to the local

parties, and to join in games, which latter he could now enjoy wholeheartedly, since he had given up desire to shine supreme in them.

It was in the midst of all this hopeful effort, having Alice for its inspiration and its object, that Jerry read the following postscript to a letter from his father :

" I hear from an anonymous correspondent—so should take no notice if I did not think it right to warn you—that you spend much time at Cloverfield. This, if the case, seems most unwise on your part, being likely to arouse ambition in a certain quarter, and revive that passing interest which you assured me was quite dead."

" I bet as that was our dear Rush !" said Mr. Catchpole, when the passage was read out to him. " He'd want to curry favour, after what he done about the heath, and yet not dare to sign his name for fear you'd blame him. He'd tell your father afterwards, and take the credit. I'm sorry for the feller ; can't go straight. But we must keep our notions private, or there's some folks in the place 'd wreck his shop."

Jerry wrote at once to tell his father that the interest referred to was by no means transitory, with the result that Mrs. Harraby Vasey was sent home at once. She had all those weeks been longing to return, hating hotels, and picturing her boy at home neglected.

" Your father will have it," she informed him on the night of her arrival, " that you have been entrapped again by Alice and her father. He declares that you told him, at the time of his illness, that you

had quite got over your infatuation, as he calls it. So I'm sent home to look after you and stop all attempts at kidnapping. And I'm to have Ethel down as a counter-attraction, which he hopes will cure you ' by reminding him of what a gentlewoman is like.' "

Ethel came, intent upon reconquest, for the thought that Jerry was escaping piqued her strongly. But finding him so much engaged, and calmly friendly, she had to look about her for some other pastime. There was only the new Vicar, who succumbed at once to her seductions ; but his one idea of love included marriage, and his honest conversation, scorning all the arts of dalliance, occasionally made her yawn behind her lily hand. She complained much of the dulness of the place, and after some deliberation, mentioned Mr. Bredbane to her aunt as a hard-worked individual who would much appreciate a country outing.

Mrs. Harraby Vasey jumped at the suggestion, crying :

" Dear Alfred ! I've so often wished to see him once again. And now that Beryl is away there can be no unpleasantness. I'll write and ask the poor dear man this minute."

Informed that Bredbane was to reappear among them, Jerry sniffed, and gave a searching look to Ethel, who returned it suavely. However, he made no objection, since it pleased his mother.

XLVII

ALFRED arrived—a fatter, lazier Alfred, with views enlarged to fit the roomy editorial chair of a Liberal weekly paper to which he had a month before succeeded. Sure now of a position and an income, his thoughts ran much on matrimony and a home existence. His sentimental eyes at Ethel sickened Jerry, who had preserved enough of his old feelings to be jealous for her. Being out of temper for the moment upon other grounds, it gave him satisfaction to cut short their tender greetings in the need to consult the lady upon urgent business of his own.

“There, look at that!” he said, when he had dragged her off into the garden, placing in her hands a letter which had just come by the second post.

Eric had evidently borne in mind his promise to intercede for Jerry when he got the chance, for Mr. Harraby Vasey wrote from Cannes :

“Eric informs me that you wish me to believe you earnest in your attachment to that girl at Cloverfield. Of course I cannot forbid an engagement, since you are of age and have had plenty of time to reflect ; but let me put before you certain aspects of the case which may not, perhaps, have occurred to you.” There followed two whole sheets of worldly wisdom, concerning the advantage of a

young man looking for a wife above him, and the reasons why poor Alice must for ever be below. The letter concluded with this curious touch : " Moreover, though you may not think it of importance, she is a head and shoulders taller than you are." (The difference in height was half an inch, for they had measured it !)

" Well, what do you make of that ?" asked Jerry. " Isn't it sheer nonsense ?"

To his amazement, Ethel took his father's part, and warmly. Fixing her gaze upon the shadow of an ilex-tree across the lawn where an under-gardener in his shirt-sleeves was employed in sweeping up the fallen leaves, the weary sadness of the grey sky in her eyes, she opened scornfully :

" You child ! You think because you fall in love that you must marry. My dearest boy, there never was a more disastrous fallacy. One loves a hundred times ; one marries only once, or twice at most ; and then one ought to think of money and position—things which make a measure of contentment fairly certain. Love is a touchy, inconvenient thing to live with, and soon turns to hate. But one can be always friendly where one's always comfortable."

He called her a cold-blooded little wretch, and let her go back to her middle-aged admirer. Pondering her outburst with his other troubles as he walked alone among the fir-trees, he fancied he discerned in it an intimation of her will to marry Bredbane, and felt vexed.

But an hour later, having occasion to pass through the hall, he heard her preaching the same doctrine

to the journalist. She supposed herself alone with Alfred, and was speaking irritably :

"How foolish of you ! I thought you were above that kind of thing. You remind me that I've said I loved you. Well, perhaps I did ; but that has nothing whatever to do with it. If you must know, I am going to marry Lord Pengarry, whom you know."

"Good Lord ! He's seventy !"

"No, he isn't. And suppose he were, that's not the question. Alfred, do, for goodness' sake, be sensible ! He's rich, and has a lot of influence ; and can't you see that, as his wife, I shall be a useful and a pleasant friend to have, whereas if I did what you wish and married you——"

"What's this I hear ?" cried Jerry, coming forward.

"You see, I really practise what I preach !" his cousin answered, scarcely hiding her annoyance. "You, Jerry, being rich, can perhaps afford to be quite natural, though I doubt it. But Alfred and I are of the race of needy climbers. A middle-class marriage upon barely decent means would wreck us both."

With these words she sailed off, leaving Bredbane to face Jerry in that hall which had witnessed former disconcertions of the journalist. He looked stunned. Jerry, pitying his state, proposed that they should take a walk together, and he agreed with the submission of complete bewilderment. The shock had for the moment killed discretion. Jerry obtained some startling sidelights on his cousin's way of life.

"Lord Pengarry! Of course you don't know the man; she's kept it dark down here; but if you only saw him! He's one of the rich old fossils Ethel keeps on strings. What they call well-preserved—wears corsets and that kind of thing."

"I expect it's all a joke," said Jerry soothingly. "She said it just as an excuse for saying no to you."

"But, my dear man—if you only knew, you'd say she's bound to marry me!—" Here Bredbane paused, as fearing he had said too much. He added in a tone of most reluctant worship: "The girl's incarnate depravation—perfect of her kind! She fascinates."

"Nothing half so bad as that!" said Jerry, laughing. "She only thinks it swagger to pretend to be like that."

But this confidence of his was somewhat shaken when, on their returning to the house, Ethel took him aside and said as to a servant:

"You overheard a piece of news which was not meant for you, and you will kindly keep it secret till I choose to publish it."

She was aware that he and Bredbane had walked off together, and had no doubt but they had talked her over. She was furious. Her air of outraged virtue staggered Jerry.

She then took Bredbane out on to the loggia beyond the drawing-room for a short while, returning in complete possession of her old ascendancy. Bredbane no longer dared to look at Jerry; he hung on Ethel's movements slavishly. For the remainder of his visit he avoided private talks, devoting himself

chiefly to Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who delighted in his conversation and attendance.

The Vicar, coming in to supper on the Sunday night, betrayed a lively interest in him, such as a naturalist might take in some strange kind of beetle, having been warned by Ethel that he was an unbeliever. To stave off the young priest's attentions, when they proved uninteresting, Ethel had invented a belief in the celibacy of the clergy, which the Vicar strove to combat. Bredbane, for mischief, took the Vicar's part, while Jerry championed Ethel's point of view. The battle raged till nearly midnight, slightly scandalizing Mrs. Harraby Vasey, who rebuked them all for making fun of sacred subjects. It was renewed upon the following day, when the Vicar reappeared again in time for lunch, unable to forgo the observation of a known agnostic.

Upon the whole the visit of the journalist passed off agreeably, despite its stormy opening. He returned to London on the Tuesday. Ethel followed two days later. Jerry had begun to think of her engagement to Lord Pengarry—whoever he might be—as fiction, when in April it was publicly announced. Mr. Harraby Vasey wrote from Cannes exultingly :

“ They say he's old, but Ethel was always cut out for an old man's darling. I have sent her my warmest congratulations. The family is doing so well matrimonially that it seems a shame that Jerry must needs spoil the average.”

“ I should take that for consent,” said Mr. Catchpole when informed of this. “ That and the other letter what he wrote is quite enough. He'll soon

give over fretting. And in the end he'll take and like Miss Alice better than he do you, I shouldn't wonder. I've known that happen."

So Jerry went on gaily with his work.

In May Mr. Harraby Vasey went with Beryl and her husband to Pallanza, where there was a family gathering, including the parent Tavans and Lord and Lady Pengarry on their honeymoon. He wrote from thence a rapturous letter, proclaiming Ethel's husband the most finished gentleman that he had ever met. From Pallanza he repaired to Switzerland with the Pengarrys, signifying his intention to remain there through the summer.

In the meanwhile Jerry had a stroke of rare good fortune. Lord Mells, in Ireland, wrote to offer him the post of agent on a small estate of his near Ely. He went at once to Cloverfield and showed the document to Farmer Robert, who seemed quite annoyed.

"I'll thank his lordship not to interfere," he growled. "You aren't fit yet to have the charge of anything."

"I've passed examinations," Jerry mentioned.

"What does that prove, I should like to know? Of course you'll do as you like about accepting. But I hate his lordship doing this against his interests. You can't run great estates like his on lines of sentiment."

It transpired that Robert Vasey thought the offer owing entirely to his lordship's kindness for himself and family. Jerry was going to marry his (Bob Vasey's) daughter, so the earl flung largesse. His burly independence fumed and fretted.

Jerry, however, saw with other eyes. Moreover, Mr. Catchpole, whom he next consulted, adjured him not to throw away so fair a chance.

"It ain't the job itself, nor how you'll do it, that I think about," this friend explained. "It's just the good as it'll do you to be on your own a bit."

Deciding on acceptance—to his mother's great dismay, for she felt certain that the news would kill his father—Jerry sat up late that night in efforts to devise a seemly answer, when a huge catastrophe befell, effacing everything.

XLVIII

TOWARDS noon of a very sultry August day the Dodman turned into a wayside inn ten miles from Larkmeadow. The house, whose sign of the Plough was almost hidden in the foliage of a chestnut tree before the door, stood far from any village, on the London road, to which the sweep up to it formed a kind of bay. The taproom, with its sanded floor and high-backed settles, held a pleasant shade, and breathed an odour of drinks past which charmed the wayfarer. A slattern girl received his order for some gin and beer, then left him to the sentimental musings which the place inspired. The buzz of flies became soft music to his soul ; the sticky ring-stains on the table were symbolical of well-known joys.

He looked back on his term in prison as a cruel deprivation, though while it lasted he had never once repined. With prison life, as such, he had no quarrel. The work was nothing terrible ; the food was good ; he liked the chaplain's visits and the prayers and hymns ; the hours of solitude had been beguiled by dreams of mournful and religious sentiment. Only as he trudged to-day through dust and heat, with mind made irritable, had he felt disgust with it. The roads were worse to tramp than formerly, owing to the motors, vile inventions

of the wealthy, of which mere thought involved a perfect hæmorrhage of oaths. He beheld himself the victim of injustice, as he plodded on. That he had not been convicted on the question of the heath seemed immaterial ; for if Mr. Harraby Vasey had let well alone the police would not have searched his (Ditcher's) cottage and found that reaphook, the conclusive evidence. Now, as he thought of home, a lump rose in his throat. He was going to see again his wife and children. They had always formed a most united family, devoted to the poor old dad in spite of everything ; and he had not set eyes on them for two long years. He drew a sleeve across his eyes and swallowed something as the slipshod waitress came back with his drink.

The publican, a red-faced man—perspiring freely, although he had discarded coat and waistcoat—looked in to see the nature of the customer.

“ Good mornin’,” he observed. “ I ha’n’t seen yow afore.”

“ No, I don’t belong about here. I be on a jarney.”

“ Afoot ? Well, I don’t envy ye, a day like this.”

“ That fare uncommon, walkin’ ; but that’s nicely cule in here. I reckon I shall set and rest a bit.”

“ And welcome. Where might yow be a-goin’ tew?”

“ Larkmedder—agen Nornham yonder. That’s my native home.”

“ Oh ah ! We ha’ heerd good tidy talk o’ Larkmedder. The papers give us nawthun else for months. All about that there common.”

" I ha'n't heerd ta nooz, bein' as I ha' bin away close on tew year."

" Oh, there was dewuns, I can tell ye—proce-sionin' and riots and what not. But now, a long while, that's been settled like."

" I reckon he ha' grabbed ta heth. That seem a shame, seein' as that were ollus common land. But us poor chaps ha' got to lump that, I suppose."

" Yow ha' got hold o' ta wrong end, guvnor. Mr. Harraby Vasey took and give that to the parish."

" Well, of all ta mucky, ondesarvin' tricks !" the Dodman roared, all the blood in his body rushing to his head.

" Yow ha'n't no call to fare that crazed, old dear !" exclaimed the landlord of the Plough, dismayed. " Wa, what ha' took ye sudden ?"

" Yow don't know all I suffered 'long o' that there heth !" replied the Dodman mastering his feelings. " But that's neither here nor there. I could dew wi' some more o' this same tippie, guvnor !"

Recalled to prudence, he discoursed no more of Larkmeadow, but turned the conversation to the prospects of the harvest, of which the landlord took a pessimistic view ; but all the while his brain throbbed painfully ; and when, emerging from the shade, he took the road once more, his feelings found vent in a comprehensive oath.

The course of events at Larkmeadow had been quite unknown to him. He had received some letters from his wife, and had replied to them ; but, as neither he nor she had scholarship enough to sign their names, it was necessary for each to have

recourse to a friend—in his case it had been the prison chaplain—which necessity restricted their communication to inquiries after health and pious wishes. He had taken it for granted he would find the heath enclosed on his return ; had seen himself the victim of superior force, supported, it might be, by legal right. Now it appeared that Mr. Harraby Vasey had never had a scrap of right on his side, since he delivered up the heath without a lawsuit. He had known all along that it was common land. Consequently—the deduction was God's truth for the indignant wayfarer—consequently he (John Ditcher) had done time for nothing, for a rich man's game, while the real culprit lived in splendour and repute !

To kill a man, however wicked, in cold blood would have been against his principles ; but he possessed a weapon which attacks not life, but property—the thing that sets one man above another, the support of power ; and when power bruised him he had always had recourse to it. The Grange stood there—a pulpit ready for the preacher of the wrath of God. The picture of the Grange in flames waxed clear before him ; the voices of his home cried out for vengeance.

He walked until he saw ahead of him the windmill on the hill commanding Nornham, when he left the road by the first stile he came to, and made a lengthy deviation to avoid the town. The congregation of red roofs and garden trees about a grey church tower stayed long in sight amid the undulating patchwork of hedged fields.

It being of supreme importance to his plans that

he should not be recognized, he dragged his hat over his eyes and raised his neckerchief. He was going to have one look at his own place by daylight before his night's work drove him into hiding.

Keeping to the fields, advancing cautiously, he reached at last the point of view he sought, and, lying down beside a hedge on Carter's Farm, watched the sun set on Larkmeadow.

The children were at play upon the heath as usual ; their voices rang exactly as of yore. The swallows wheeled and shrieked around the disused windmill. There was not in the scene a hedgerow where he had not set a trap, a field he had not netted in old days. The place belonged to him, the native, more truly than to any gentleman who comes and goes. And he had been happy there, a monarch in his way, until a stranger came and interfered. To hell with strangers ! Who wanted strangers in the place at all ?

From where he lay he saw his wife come out of his own cottage door and fling some soapsuds on the garden, then go in again. That he could not go down to her until his vengeance was accomplished increased his rage against the foreign busybody.

When the sunset had begun to fade he turned away and plodded three miles across country to a public-house where he was quite unknown. There he sat in a corner until closing-time, his hat over his eyes, repelling all attempts at conversation, drinking and sucking at his cutty clay. The money that his wife had sent him for his journey home was enough to keep him in good drink for several days. Before he left he made the landlord find a bottle not too

large to enter his coat pocket, and fill it for his comfort on the way.

By then he was a madman in the clutch of one idea. The vision of pure justice struck him blind. Flames came and went before his eyes, obscuring the night landscape, which he traversed rapidly without the least fatigue. In less than an hour he was in the well-known fir-wood, near the out-buildings, which he had more than once explored when prowling round in search of coal on winter nights.

There was a lean-to shed against the coach-house wall. He found it ; the door opened easily. Entering, he shut the door behind him, then struck a match and lit a candle-end he had brought with him. The shed contained a fine store of combustibles—firewood, old newspapers, sacks, and empty crates. Drunk as he was, he laid his fire methodically. The wooden shed would catch light from it, and the flames would pass on to the barge-boards of the coachhouse roof. There was a lot of outside wood in all the buildings which would help things on. As he worked, he talked as to a favourite hound :

“ Now, Parson, gie it un—a fair old treat ! There’s one thing yow dew fare to miss—a drop o’ ile. Yow preach ta better when ye’re wet, ta same as others. Now, bo’ ! Steady ! A fair start ! ”

He held his candle to the pile of fuel in three places, then thrust it in to burn amid the heap.

“ That’s he ! Yow keep a-dewin’ ! Yow’ll sune find yer voice ! ”

With that he went out of the shed, refastened the

door carefully, and lurched off with a heavy roll into the fir-wood. Two fields beyond the heath he turned to look. There was a flicker on the sky which came and went. He chuckled and pursued his way, remarking : " That'll larn un ! "

He slept in a dry ditch four miles from home, awoke soon after dawn next day to drizzling rain, and tramped on through the grey, wet mist to Lowestoft, where he had relations.

XLIX

JERRY'S bedroom at the Grange looked out across the stable-yard. As he sat up late that night, engaged on the important letter to Lord Mells, he gradually became aware of crackling noises and a smell of fire. Going to the window on a slight misgiving, he found the outlook blocked by clouds of smoke. At the same time he heard shouts proceeding from the coachman's room above the stable, and the plunging of the horses in their stalls. These sounds deciding his astonished wits, he ran downstairs and out into the yard. The coachman, in his shirt and trousers, was already there, intent to save the horses, assisted by his son, aged twelve. This boy, who, by good fortune, owned a bicycle, was told to ride to Nornham and alarm the fire brigade. The coachman's wife sped off to rouse the village. Her husband, helped by Jerry, led the horses out into the fir-wood, and there tethered them. That done, his next thought was to save the carriages ; but at the opening of the double doors such flames burst forth that Jerry had them closed again, and gave his whole attention to the house.

By that time all the servants were afoot and needing orders. Grain and another ran to find the garden hose. There was a small hand fire-engine upon the premises, but that, unluckily, stood in the

coachhouse, which was blazing with a roar. Its glare reduced the starlit sky to a mere dome, the fir-tree tops to leaping shadows on a wall. It struck Jerry as miraculous that a strong wind should be blowing in the sheltered hollow, as if of will to drive the flames against the house, while all around no breath of air was stirring, the tree-tops were dead still against the sky.

"The best thing we can do is to get out all the valuables. The house'll be afire afore the engine comes from Nornham. They ollus do forget who've got the key. There ought to be a fire-brigade in every parish, and would be if I had my way," cried an authoritative voice, the voice of Mr. Catchpole, who appeared upon the scene, heading a crowd of half-dressed helpers from the village.

Hearing that judgment, Jerry ran up to his mother's room. Mrs. Harraby Vasey was endeavouring to dress herself, distracted by the cries of all the maids, who at the first alarm had rushed into her room for help. Jerry ordered the demented servants to wrap up quickly and go out on to the lawn. When they were gone he told his mother not to finish dressing, but to put on a warm cloak and come with him. She obeyed with trembling, giving a last look to her comfortable room. From a staircase window Jerry noticed that the fire was driving hard against the house, and heard the voice of Mr. Catchpole, saying :

"That's got a hold already ! Look alive !"

Some thirty men were now employed upon the work of salvage, among them the new Vicar, pipe in mouth as usual, and the Atheist, lamenting shrilly as he worked.

Having shepherded his mother out on to the lawn, where the group of tousled and affrighted maids already waited, and urged her to take shelter at the lodge, Jerry went back into the house, now silhouetted on a monstrous glow.

“ You’re just the man I want,” said Mr. Catchpole, staggering beneath his share of the weight of a huge cabinet. “ You tell ’em where things are. The plate’s gone out already—Grain and that long-legged footman saw to that. They’ve took that to the Bell. I’m standing things across the lawn, under them trees.” An hour later, when Jerry came out laden for at least the thirtieth time, his mother pounced on him and cried : “ Don’t—don’t go in again ! Don’t, I implore you !” She had not moved a foot from where he left her, and was still the centre of the group of trembling maids. Smoke pouring through the windows and a glimpse of fire within made her regard the house as certain death. The fire-engine from Nornham had been long at work without any visible result. Another one from Jelwick Park had just arrived, but the men in charge of it were idle for the lack of water. The crowd upon the lawn increased each minute ; sightseers rode up on bicycles, in carts, and even motor-cars, with joyful shouts. When the Vicar of the parish stopped to light his pipe before re-entering the burning house, some wag called out : “ There’s fire enough without that, guvnor !” evoking loud guffaws.

“ Don’t, don’t, I beg of you !” pleaded Mrs. Harraby Vasey tearfully. “ Please make them stop at once. It’s much too dangerous. Nothing we have is worth the risk of life.”

"Suppose you was to take the lady and the servants round to mine," said Mr. Catchpole, with a chuckle, close behind him. "That isn't fit for her to stand here, not with this rough crowd." Jerry clutched at the suggestion. Having seen his mother safe in Katey's charge, he sped back to the centre of excitement. He was stopped by a policeman on the drive.

"Oh, it's you, sir! I beg pardon. But we have to watch. There's a lot o' roughs 'd see their harvest in a job o' this sort, and I'm afraid there's some o' them got in already."

As he went on towards the house, whose front now belched forth flame from every window, Jerry suspected that a fair amount of pillaging was going on. He saw men carrying things off in directions other than that where Mr. Catchpole had his guarded store. But he felt no indignation at the thought; the whole scene being unreal to him, its excitement purely spectacular.

"There's nothing more to do," said Mr. Catchpole, at his side once more. "There'll be some dead men round the place come morning. There's some from Nornham found the cellars fast enough. I see a feller making off with four big bottles."

Just then the roof collapsed with a great noise; the house, or what remained of it, was reduced to a mere grate, from which vast sheets of flame went up to lick the sky. By the time that final blaze subsided, the colours of the dawn were in the east; its paleness clothed the lawns and floated like a ghost among the trees. The illusion of a painted show was dead. The house, a blackened shell, exhaled

dense clouds of smoke ; the garden-beds were trampled, the shrubs broken ; the lawn was marked with wheel-tracks, strewn with rubbish, made unrecognizable ; pieces of furniture, books, boxes, china ornaments, standing in heaps, increased the desolation. In addition to all this, it began to drizzle, and some clocks which had been rescued from the house struck five, one after another, their familiar voices sounding feeble in the open air.

Jerry sent a messenger to Nornham with a telegram to be despatched immediately the office opened. He remained upon the lawn until the sightseers had all dispersed, and only workers from the village lingered, waiting for their chance to grasp his hand and say a word of sympathy. They had brought two rickcloths from the nearest farm, and with them covered up the valuables until such time as these could be removed to proper shelter. A policeman mounted guard over the heap. Mr. Catchpole and the Vicar, one on either side of Jerry, had been exchanging views on the calamity.

"There's one thing," said the former in conclusion, "there'd ha' been a sight more fuss, and less work done, if someone else we know had been at home. Now, Mr. Jerry, come you round to mine and get some breakfast."

But just then Alice and her brother Charley Vasey came up the drive, wheeling their bicycles.

"Father wants you and Mrs. Harraby Vasey to come to us at once," Charles shouted from afar. "He'll send the waggonette to fetch you."

"Thanks awfully, but I've already made arrangements. We can have the Vicarage," said Jerry.

Charley showed his disappointment. Looking at the smoking heap, he sighed : " We're late as usual. The fun's over. What luck you have ! Things always happen to you."

He was drawn into the talk of Mr. Catchpole and the Vicar, to which the Atheist contributed a fractious word from time to time ; while Jerry strolled with Alice round the ruins. Touched by that spectacle of desolation, she held out her hand to him. They thought themselves alone and unobserved.

But Joe Turpin cried : " Three cheers for Mas'r Jerry. Hip, hip, hip, hooray !" and Harbut joined : " Gawd bless ta happy pair !"

The cheers were given with good feeling by the group of weary helpers.

L

ONE evening in the month of April subsequent to the destruction of the Grange there was a crowd round Mr. Catchpole's cottage gate. Inside the three-foot paling Katey and her mother stood and called good wishes, while in the roadway half the village bawled encouragement to the chairman of the parish council and to Mr. Meadows, who were once more setting forth upon a public errand.

"You've got to talk him over, mind!" cried Katey, "else I'll never forgive you. I've set my heart on being at that wedding."

"We shall try and dew our dooty as old public characters," wheezed Mr. Meadows, reduced to helpless giggles by the general interest.

"He were ollust a slinkin' fule," observed the Dodman. "Tried to rob us of our rights afore, he did, and now he'd cheat us of a frolic by holdin' Jerry's weddin' up in Lunnon."

"There yow wrong ta feller, Dodman. He baint noways spiteful!" said Joe Turpin. "On'y he don't fare to be able not to think straight like what we dew."

"I don't see what call yow ha' got to take and plague ta gennleman," piped Mr. Pretious. "He 'on't heed ye, and I don't blame un neither. A lot of interferin' impidence, that's what I call ut."

"Dew yow shut up, Atheist. We ha' heerd yow diff'rent times," said Harbut summarily.

"Won't you join us on the deputation, Mr. Rush?" sang out the chairman of the Parish Council, espying the fat shopkeeper upon the outskirts of the crowd.

"No, that I 'on't. I done wi' interferin'. And I had enow o' deputations and processions over that there heath."

"Well, yow might lend the deppitation a little o' your soft sawder," urged Joe Turpin mildly, as Mr. Rush retired a trifle hurriedly.

"Catchpull can manage that all right," laughed Mr. Meadows. "I mind ta day we hooked un for ta parish council, poor old dear!"

"He've changed a bit since then, I reckon," said the Dodman.

"And so ha' you, or ought to have!" said Mr. Catchpole sternly. "If you want to know, he haven't altered, not a bit, since first he come here. The newspapers a-mobbing of him kind o' dashed his spirits for a time, but now he's right again, and just the same as ever. We shall have a job with him."

In fact, when he returned to Larkmeadow to find his house in ruins, Mr. Harraby Vasey had regained his buoyant spirits. He had left the place derided; he returned majestic. Misfortune placed a crown upon his brow. The general sympathy suffused his soul, and he became once more his genial, kindly self. Mrs. Harraby Vasey's serious illness, resulting from the shock of seeing fire consume the home she idolized, failed to depress him. He even accepted

Jerry's mad desires to earn his living and to wed beneath him, and took credit to himself for his son's obstinacy as an inherited trait.

Since the marriage must take place, it seemed desirable that the couple should begin their life together in some other district, where the status of the bride's father was not known ; and this Lord Mells' offer made quite natural. That offer, and two visits of his lordship to the Vicarage during the time of Mrs. Harraby Vasey's illness, he ascribed entirely to his niece's marriage with a member of the peerage. In the enjoyment of good health and spirits, he pooh-poohed his old preoccupations, giving the best of his attention to the problem of rebuilding the Grange.

To cousin Robert he once more held out the hand of friendship, conferring with him on the subject of the coming marriage. Since Robert's daughter was the beneficiary, he of course dictated his own terms, and was amused by Robert's difficulty in accepting them. The chief point of his stipulation was that the ceremony should take place in London quietly. Mrs. Harraby Vasey's state of health made this imperative ; he put it thus to spare the feelings of the other, who could not perceive the manifest impossibility of Alice being married from the farm. Farmer Robert kept his temper and consented, striving to think only of his daughter's happiness. Thank Heaven, he reflected, she would live in Cambridgeshire, where Jerry, as he heard, was doing well. Mr. Harraby Vasey was quite charmed with Alice personally.

" It is not exactly what I should have chosen

for my son," he now told everybody, "but Jerry seems in earnest; and I have always held strong views against coercion in such matters. And the girl herself is wonderfully improved—in dress, looks, manners, everything."

He was saying this to Lord Pengarry, who had arrived that afternoon upon a visit to the Vicarage, at the moment when the deputation from the village rang the front-door bell.

Beryl and Eric had come over in their car from Uffield, where they had a little house within the park, bringing Alfred Bredbane, their most frequent visitor. For ever mindful of his noble conduct in resigning Beryl, the married lovers had known no contentment till they installed him as a kind of fetish in their home, where Eric, who had now those intellectual yearnings which had once been Beryl's, hung upon his every word; while he, on his side, welcomed invitations which enabled him to be near Ethel, who was much at Larkmeadow.

"I am not a snob, I hope," said Mr. Harraby Vasey, astride before the fire, surveying the family gathering with complacency; "but I could not at first regard the match with favour. There are different worlds——"

"Mr. Catchpole and Mr. Meadows would like to see you, sir," Grain's voice announced.

"Oh!" cried Mr. Harraby Vasey, with a face of humorous dismay. "I wonder what they want with me this time. "They won't entice me on the parish council—not again! That's a story you must hear, Pengarry. Alfred, I see, remembers it.

You really ought to see our village fathers. Show them in here, Grain."

The deputation was transparently abashed at being shown into the presence of a lively party, whose talk and laughter ceased as they appeared. All eyes were turned on them. Ethel, who had till then been sitting close to Bredbane, crossed the room, and perched upon the arm of her old husband's chair.

"This here's more than I bargained for," breathed Mr. Meadows, mopping his brow with a large coloured handkerchief. Mr. Catchpole squared his shoulders and looked fierce. All the gentry stood up and shook hands with them. The master of the house inquired their business kindly. "Sit down, sit down!" he urged; but they kept standing.

"That won't take long," said Mr. Catchpole, flushed and hesitating. "We're here—Mr. Medders and me—on behalf of the parish, to ask if you can't see your way to have the wedding in the country here, and not in London. The people'll be wholly disappointed; they're that fond of Mr. Gerald, and they've subscribed for a nice present—everyone give something."

The speaker pausing, Mr. Harraby Vasey said with some acidity:

"There are reasons—Mrs. Harraby Vasey's health, for one thing—which make it necessary that the ceremony should take place away, and very quietly. Please don't suppose we shall neglect the village, or defraud it of festivities. I have arranged for a whole day's amusement—sports at which my niece, Lady Pengarry, has kindly consented to

present the prizes—a good dinner in the big barn at my farm, and in the evening fireworks and a bonfire.”

“That’s kind of you, no doubt; but we don’t ask for nothing. Just now we’d sooner give than we’d receive. We’d ha’ done the most o’ that ourselves, without no organizing, for the sake of Mr. Gerald, whom we look on as a friend. That’s the mistake you made at first, sir—treating of us as a kind o’ pets and curiosities. Folks don’t like that, and there’s a strongish feeling in the place against this wedding taking place in London. They reckon you’re ashamed of the match; and that put their backs up, seeing as the bride’s a local lady, known and liked among ’em. They feel that as a slight upon old neighbours. They’ve been at Mr. Vasey, and he say that ain’t his fault, and he’d be glad enough to have the wedding there at Cloverfield. So me and Mr. Medders come to you. We know we ha’n’t no right to interfere with your arrangements, but all the place would like to see them married. so we stepped up to ask you as a favour.”

Mr. Harraby Vasey frowned, his jaw fell, and his underlip stuck forth lugubriously.

“Mrs. Harraby Vasey’s health, I fear, will not allow it,” he murmured with a sad shake of the head. He was hurt by the home truths in Mr. Catchpole’s speech. The village was unlucky in its spokesman. Why, he wondered, did the silly people send to him a man like this instead of Rush, who had the gift to speak acceptably?

“I really think that you might reconsider, Vasey,” put in Lord Pengarry.

"I will, I will," was the despairing answer. "But still I fear that it is quite impossible."

Now Mr. Meadows, who, as an excited listener, had noticed all the diplomatic faults in his bold leader's speech, determined to cut in and try his fortune.

"We know, sir," he began, "as the parish have behaved disgraceful towards ye in the past ; but now they fare right sorry for it, and they wish to make amends. And I'm sure there baint a gentleman livin' as is better loved and respected than what yow be here among us now this day. And if yow could anyhow see yer way to grantin' our request, the whole parish 'd be humbly grateful and 'd bless your name. Them chaps down at ta Chequers be main sorry for all they done against ye in the past, and they'd take this as a sign and token o' your favourable forgiveness towards 'em, which that vex 'em sore."

Mr. Harraby Vasey's frown was gone ; his face resumed its humorous, benignant smile.

"You must give in, dad, after that," his daughter laughed. "I don't see how it could be bad for mother's health. She told me yesterday she would go in any case, and having it down here would save the journey."

Mr. Harraby Vasey's mind was working at tremendous speed the while he seemed to ponder with a gentle, sad expression. The prospect of a great, spontaneous proof of popularity, astonishing the countryside, arrided him. It might, he could conceive, atone in part for the ignominious ordeal of a wedding-breakfast at the farm. Another moment,

and he caught a glimpse of universal brotherhood, his true ideal. He was well-known for a Radical, and as such might be expected to despise conventions. It was as a Radical that he would breakfast at the farm and smile on bumpkins.

"Well, well, I'll see. Yes, yes, it shall be managed," he murmured in a tone of vast indulgence.

THE END